

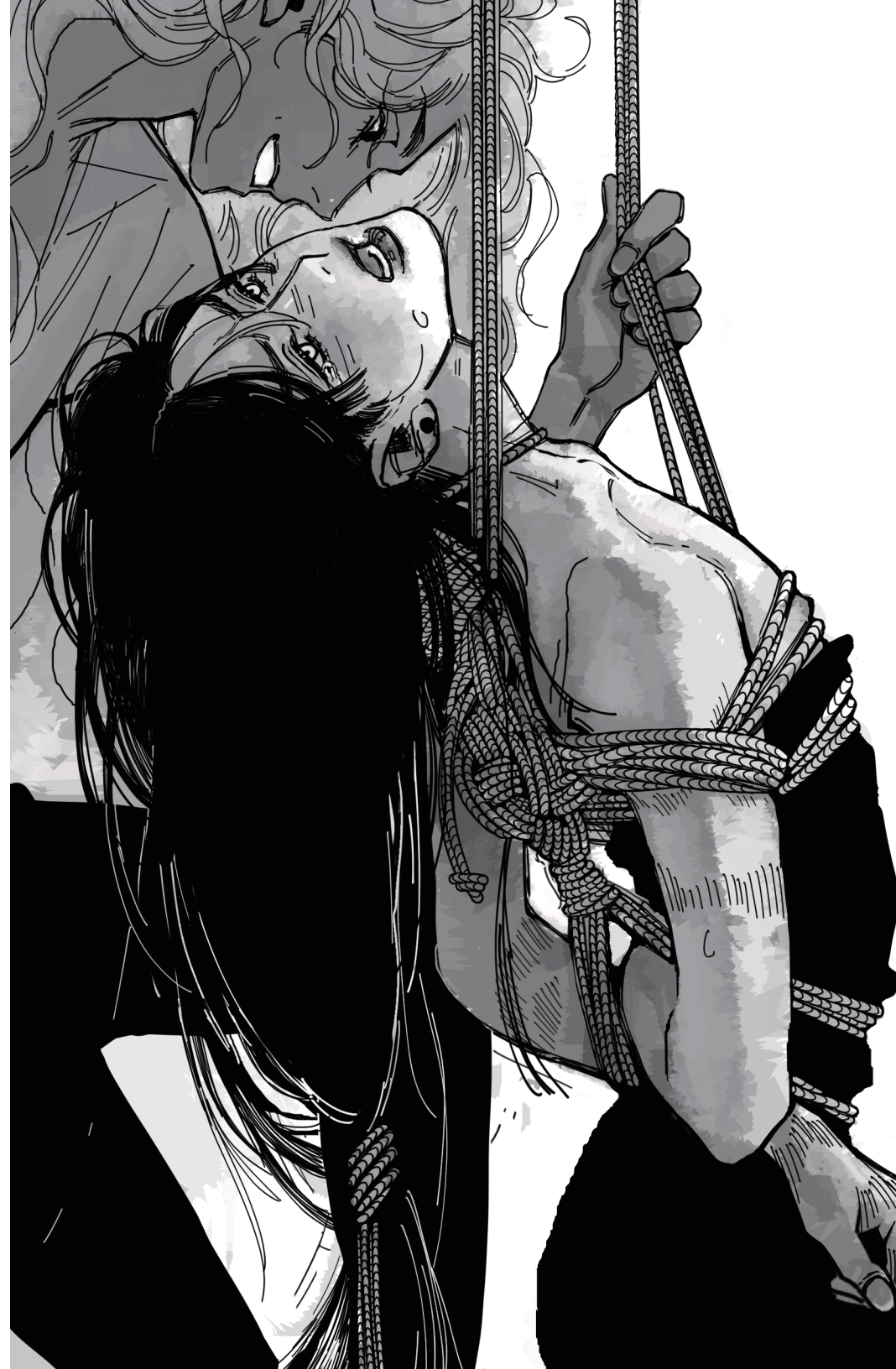
THE TIES THAT BIND US

*Two lifetimes,
they belong to you;
no regrets*

The Ties that Bind Us

A RANWAN FAN ANTHOLOGY





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The Ranwan Anthology is a non-profit fan project focused on the pairing Mo Ran/
Chu Wanning from *Dumb Husky and His White Cat Shizun* by Meatbun Doesn't
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Contents

PART I. FORGED

Dear Yuheng 03

By Le

To spy on their roommate, Mo Ran and Chu Wanning put aside their differences and... pretend to date?!

Our Token of Love Burns Red 33

By Lana

The first time Imperial Chancellor Chu meets Mo Ran, he slaps him across the face.

Belonging to You 65

By Mar

Sometimes, Chu Wanning needs a reminder of who he belongs to. Mo Ran is always there to help.

The Harbinger of Dawn 95

By Ria

It starts because of an unanswered letter, and it ends with a promise made to reach through time.

PART II. FOUND

How We Learn to Love 127

By Jordan

In the space of one heartbeat, Chu Wanning sees Mo Ran's smiling face; and then nothing but blackness.

Interrupted Connections 151

By Zan

Mo Ran doesn't usually make friends online, but he can't help but be drawn to someone he meets on a niche online forum.

What Lies Beneath the Haze 177

By Precious

Everything changes in Chu Wanning's life the moment he meets Mo Ran.

Even Unseen Stars Still Burn 207

By Bee

It's so much easier, talking through Xia Sini. Chu Wanning wishes he had thought of this years ago.

PART III. FATE

Love Again 245

By Eya

There's a man haunting Chu Wanning's dreams. He doesn't know him, but their hearts seemingly beat together.

Just to Breathe Out 273

By Cherry

The red spider lily. A link to final goodbyes, cycle of rebirth, and guidance of the dead into their new life.

My Heart Remembers the Way Home 308

By Purl

When Chu Wanning removed the flower from Taxian-jun's heart, he wasn't expecting there to be an after.

CONTRIBUTORS

All our contributors 343

PART I.
THE TIES THAT BIND US

Forged





macu_artz

Dear Yuheng

BY LE

DEAR YUHENG,

I think my new roommate doesn't like me! He moved in after my old one (cruelly, heartlessly) left, and we don't get along at all! Just yesterday, we got into a huge fight because he left his things lying all over the place... We live in a STUDENT APARTMENT, not a doghouse! Please help!
-Husky

Dear Husky,
Sometimes those we see every day see our flaws. Look inwards.
-Yuheng

There were many ways Mo Ran envisioned his Friday night could go, but sitting across from his abhorrent roommate in the on-campus boba house where he works part-time was *not* one of them.

“So?” Chu Wanning speaks first, fixing Mo Ran with a steely gaze. “Why did you ask to meet me?”

Mo Ran sighs. *Believe me, if I had a choice, I wouldn't want to be here either!*

Chu Wanning takes his sigh as a reply, and his phoenix eyes narrow into slits. “...Is this about yesterday?”

Mo Ran remembers yesterday. He left his room, about to cook dinner, when he saw an absolute mess all over their living room. Loose sheets of paper with Chu Wanning's rough scribbles scattered across the floor, encroaching into the kitchen.

Mo Ran had read Yuheng's advice and looked inwards. But he is not a slob like Chu Wanning. Chu Wanning, despite looking all prim and proper and *neat*, lives like an actual dog. In fact, he is sure that if Yuheng knew Chu Wanning, he would take Mo Ran's side.

Even Xue Meng didn't live like this! Mo Ran suddenly misses Xue Meng so much.

They used to live together in peace and harmony with their high school senior, Ye Wangxi. But good things never last in Mo Ran's life, and Xue Meng decided to move in with his club members at the start of their second university year.

Xue Meng claimed it was because the Mei twins' dorm was nearer to campus, and *much* more convenient. Mo Ran privately thinks it's just part of their convoluted mating ritual, but who is he to judge?

So, with Xue Meng gone and an extra room in their house, Ye Wangxi introduced Mo Ran to her acquaintance — Chu Wanning. He was a few years Mo Ran's senior, starting on his Master's, and when Mo Ran first met him, Mo Ran thought, *Wow, I can sure get along with someone as gentle-looking as Chu Wanning!*

Pui! How wrong was he!

Mo Ran takes a deep breath to suppress the way his eye wants to start twitching.

"No," he says. "It's about Ye Wangxi."

"Ye Wangxi?" Chu Wanning echoes.

Mo Ran gestures with his chin to a table at the other end of the boba house. There, alone at a table for two, is Ye Wangxi.

Chu Wanning's eyes widen. "You asked me here to... *spy* on her?"

"For you, sir." A barista Mo Ran doesn't recognise interrupts their conversation. She places a cup of boba that's more sugar than milk tea in front of Chu Wanning. Mo Ran recoils. He can smell the syrup from where he sits.

Chu Wanning, that monster, eyes it with interest before saying, "I didn't order this."

"It's on the house." She winks before going back to the counter.

Chu Wanning frowns slightly, perplexed.

Mo Ran rolls his eyes. Typical — a new part-timer who has yet to realise the futility of hitting on an ice-cold man like Chu Wanning.

Still, Mo Ran isn't surprised the newcomer tried. After all, Chu Wanning carries himself with an air of beauty and grace, an immortal amongst men with his elegant features and white clothes. As he lifts the drink, wraps his lips around the straw, and *sucks*, the other patrons stop to turn and stare at him.

Mo Ran understands, for he too cannot take his eyes off Chu Wanning. Logically, his brain hates the man, but his dick... Well, that is another matter altogether, and Mo Ran has always been appreciative of beauty.

"We're not spying on Ye-dajie," he says, forcing himself to ignore his beastly desires and turn his attention back to the matter at hand. "We're spying on..."

As if on cue, the doorbell jingles as someone new enters. Mo Ran immediately hisses when he sees *him*, strutting towards Ye Wangxi and sliding into the opposite seat.

"Xiao Yezi," the newcomer says breathlessly. He pushes his hair back. Mo Ran thinks he looks like an ass. "Sorry, I got held up at the lab. Did you wait long?"

To Mo Ran's disgust, Ye Wangxi's expression turns shy as she says, "No, I just got here."

Chu Wanning is staring at them. "That's..."

"*Nangong Si*."

Last night, after the argument with Chu Wanning and blowing steam off at the gym with Ye Wangxi, she dropped a bombshell on Mo Ran: she is going on a date with Nangong Si — a young master of second-generation riches, an all-around asshole, and Mo Ran's literal nemesis... who happens to be Chu Wanning's lab's research assistant.

At once, Mo Ran knew he needed to spy on them with Chu Wanning, and now here he is — sharing a booth with Chu Wanning at his

workplace, intermittently hiding their faces behind the flimsy menu to avoid detection from Ye Wangxi and her date.

“Wow,” Mo Ran hisses. “Did Daddy forget to give him his allowance? Is he so poor that he needs to bring his date to a *boba* shop for *dinner*?”

Chu Wanning gives him a very unamused look. “We’re all students without disposable income, and this boba house’s menu includes meals, too.”

“I *know*,” Mo Ran says as he aggressively stabs his pork chop rice. “I work here, in case you forgot.”

Ye Wangxi offers Nangong Si a sip of her boba. Mo Ran nearly gags.

“Look at how that pretentious asshole is dressed! Who even wears a white jacket to dinner?! I hope he spills his milk tea and *stains* it.”

Chu Wanning pointedly ignores him, taking another bite of his stew.

“Oh, good God,” Mo Ran harshly whispers. He thinks he would have flipped the table if it wasn’t nailed to the ground. “Look at Nangong Si *feeding* Ye Wangxi a piece of his steak. Disgusting!”

Chu Wanning, probably still miffed about doing something as immoral as spying on his roommate and research assistant, gives him a withering look. “I think Nangong Si is being very sweet.”

“*Ha*,” Mo Ran snorts. “Of course you would think that of your subordina— wait. Chu Wanning, you’re *done* with your stew?”

As Chu Wanning places his utensils down, Mo Ran looks at all the pieces of meat Chu Wanning has pushed to the side of his plate before looking at him with an affronted expression.

Chu Wanning nods.

Mo Ran explodes, scandalised by the amount of food Chu Wanning is wasting. “Look at all the beef you didn’t finish!”

“It’s all fatty meat,” Chu Wanning argues. “It’s not healthy.”

“That is a myth, and *you’re* one to talk about healthy eating!” Mo Ran argues back, equally fiercely. “Remember the other day when you dumped FIVE teaspoons of sugar into your coffee-flavoured syrup?”

Chu Wanning at least has the grace to look the slightest bit chastised before he retorts, “It’s because the coffee you bought is too bitter.”

“It’s a perfectly normal coffee blend, you just want *cavities*—”

“Mo Ran, Chu-qianbei?”

Both Mo Ran and Chu Wanning jump at the interruption. They quickly turn their heads, only to see Ye Wangxi standing before their table, Nangong Si close behind her.

Mo Ran nearly curses. He was too caught up arguing with Chu Wanning (as usual) that they unwittingly raised their voices and attracted the attention of the ones they’re supposed to be spying on!

Ye Wangxi looks at the two of them in confusion. Mo Ran can see the gears in her head turning, and he is desperately trying to grind them to a halt. She will never forgive them if she finds out they’re spying on her date!! Mo Ran already feels the phantom pain from the boxing matches she will put him through.

“Why are the two of you here—”

“We’re on a date!” Mo Ran blurts out.

Ye Wangxi stares. So does Chu Wanning.

“You’re what?”

“We’re what?”

“I’m... what?” Nangong Si chimes in. Mo Ran nearly rolls his eyes.

“Yeah!!” Mo Ran reaches across the table and grabs Chu Wanning’s hands, tightening his grip when he feels Chu Wanning trying to yank them back. “Because we’re dating! That’s what people who are dating do, you know. Go on dates. Haha. Hahaha!”

“Oh.” Ye Wangxi looks sceptical, but at least she doesn’t look suspicious anymore. “I see.”

“I don’t,” Nangong Si butts in. Mo Ran wants him to butt out. “Chu-qianbei, you didn’t mention that you’re seeing someone? Especially Mo Ran, out of all people.”

“What do you mean by that!” Mo Ran cries. “I’m a great catch! Ask Wanning!”

Chu Wanning looks as if someone is holding him at gunpoint. “I...”

“Chu-qianbei,” Nangong Si turns to Chu Wanning. “You’re *really* dating Mo Ran?”

“What’s so hard to believe!” Desperate to sell his lie and avoid being boxed by Ye Wangxi into the next century, Mo Ran stands up. Then, before he can stop and *think*—

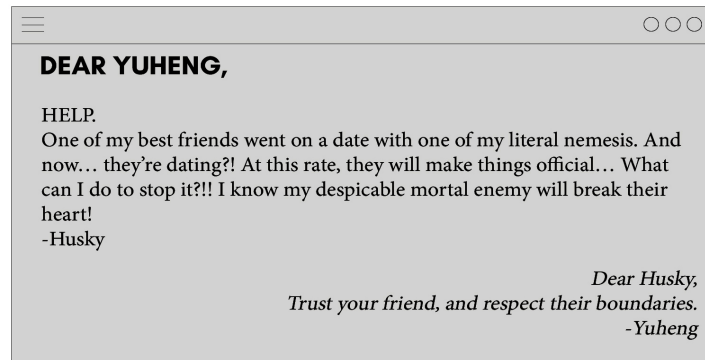
—he leans across the table and kisses Chu Wanning.

Things screech to a stop. Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi are speechless. Mo Ran is still kissing Chu Wanning, and... hey! He has actually... very soft lips, and he smells... kinda nice, like haitang—

Chu Wanning wrenches his hands away, placing them against Mo Ran's chest and shoving him back, *hard*. Mo Ran, sprawled across his side of the booth, stares up at Chu Wanning, mouth agape.

Then Chu Wanning does something none of them expects — he takes off running. Shortly, the doorbell jingles, signalling Chu Wanning's hasty exit.

Oh boy, Mo Ran thinks. *What did I get myself into?*



Wow, Mo Ran thinks as he scrolls through the Sisheng blog and reads Yuheng's latest column. *So true, Yuheng.*

With Yuheng's advice in mind, he decides he will start spying on Ye Wangxi's dates.

That night, after making sure Ye Wangxi will be working overtime, he rolls up his sleeves and cooks all of Chu Wanning's favourite dishes.

Chu Wanning has been avoiding Mo Ran ever since their kiss. That's fine — to be honest, Mo Ran kind of expected it, considering how prudish Chu Wanning is. This is the same man who, a month after moving in, set a rule banning overnight guests.

He deliberately cooks loudly, fanning the smell of the food in the direction of Chu Wanning's room, hoping to coax him out like a cat.

It works. Not a minute after he finishes, Chu Wanning's door creaks open and he cautiously pads towards the kitchen island.

"Hello, Chu-qianbei," Mo Ran says politely. "You're just in time for dinner."

Chu Wanning eyes him suspiciously, but pulls a chair out and sits.

Mo Ran hands him a bowl of rice and cuts to the chase. "So. Since Ye Wangxi is now, *ugh*, dating Nangong Si... I need your help. I would like to keep tabs on their dates."

As expected, Chu Wanning protests. "We must respect Ye Wangxi's boundaries—"

Mo Ran opens the lid of the pot at the centre of the table. There, still steaming and bursting with aroma, is Chu Wanning's favourite lionhead crabmeat hotpot. Chu Wanning stops talking.

"Please..." Mo Ran hands him a ladle, smiling encouragingly. "Help yourself."

After Chu Wanning ladles one of the lionhead crabmeat into his bowl and takes his first bite, Mo Ran strikes again.

"To facilitate my humble operation, I'd like to consult someone who knows Nangong Si's schedule." To make things clear, he adds, "Which I am sure you do, since he's your research assistant."

"I do," Chu Wanning says. He has a little furrow between his brows, and Mo Ran expects him to prattle on about how it's Not Right to spy on Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi.

Instead, he asks, "Why are you so against them dating?" And then, adding on to Mo Ran's surprise: "Isn't he your cousin?"

At the mention of their (unfortunate) familial relations, Mo Ran grimaces. *Right. I'm sure they talk during lab time...*

He wonders how close the two are, for them to talk about family affairs. His mouth twists at the thought.

Perhaps misunderstanding the look on Mo Ran's face, Chu Wanning lowers his eyes. "...Sorry," he says quietly. "I was out of line."

"Huh?" Mo Ran is surprised. Reflexively, he hurriedly assures Chu Wanning. "No, it's not like it's some huge secret or anything. I'm just..." *...surprised you would even apologise*, he wisely doesn't say.

Shaking his head, he quickly schools his expression and answers Chu Wanning's question. "Back in high school, before Mengmeng and I joined the martial arts club and became Ye-dajie's juniors, Nangong

Si broke her heart. She refused to tell us the details, even after so many years, but I know she must have been hurt pretty bad.” Mo Ran fingers subconsciously curl into a fist. “...I don’t want her to get hurt again.”

Chu Wanning, who has been quietly listening up to that point, speaks up. “That was in the past. It was years ago, and people change. Besides...” Chu Wanning looks him in the eye. “If Nangong Si really turns out to be bad news like you say, Ye Wangxi can take care of herself.”

“I *know*,” Mo Ran sighs. “She beats me up on a regular basis at the gym. I know she can take care of herself. It’s just... Ye-dajie took care of me when nobody did. Back in high school, I was a bit of a trouble-maker.”

Chu Wanning does not look surprised at that.

Mo Ran carries on. “But she didn’t give up on me. She looked out for me in school, together with Mengmeng and our other friend.”

Chu Wanning stays silent for a bit longer, as if mulling over his words. Finally, he asks haltingly, “...Do you like her?”

“Me? *Like* Ye Wangxi? Ew!” Mo Ran pulls a face. The tenseness in Chu Wanning’s shoulders melts away, but Mo Ran barely notices. “No way! She’s like... like... like my mother!”

At that, Chu Wanning lets out a soft laugh. Mo Ran can hardly believe his ears, and resists the urge to rub them.

Chu Wanning? Laughing??

Then Chu Wanning coughs into his fist, clearing his throat before casually asking, “Does your mother agree?”

“No.” Mo Ran grabs another lionhead crabmeat and places it in Chu Wanning’s bowl before helping himself to the other dishes. “They’ve never met. Ma died before I entered high school.”

Mo Ran stops mid-bite when he realises that Chu Wanning has gone still.

“I’m sorry,” Chu Wanning apologises again, the sincerity in his voice startling Mo Ran.

He is looking at Mo Ran with gentle eyes, and the way he looks at him makes Mo Ran feel like...

...like Chu Wanning understands him.

He suddenly remembers Ye Wangxi mentioning before Chu Wanning doesn’t have a family. She didn’t elaborate, and Mo Ran was never close enough to Chu Wanning to ask.

Ignoring the tugging of his heartstrings, Mo Ran shrugs. “It’s okay. I’m lucky. I have Auntie, Uncle, and Mengmeng.” Unintentionally, his eyes darken as he says, “...They show me a lot more care than my dead-beat dad and his fucked-up family does.”

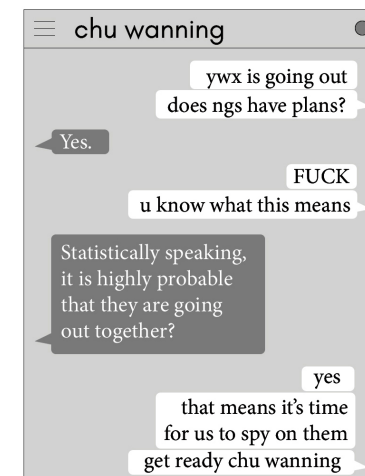
“...Mo Ran,” Chu Wanning says. “Nangong Si may be of Nangong blood, but he’s not your father.”

At once, Mo Ran’s expression shutters. Whatever bond he felt with Chu Wanning and the vulnerability he was showing immediately severs, and he scoffs, “Well, that’s hard to say now, but I’m not gonna wait until he walks out on Ye Wangxi to get together with a girl of his family’s choice.”

Chu Wanning puts down his chopsticks. “Mo Ran,” he tries to say. “I—”

Mo Ran lifts his hand. He does not want to hear it. Instead, he coolly meets Chu Wanning’s eyes and asks, “So are you going to help me or not, Chu Wanning?”

“...Fine.”



"Achoo!"

For the umpteenth time since they stepped foot into this blasted dog café, Mo Ran sneezes. He is miserable — not just because he is spending yet another day spying on his best friend and his mortal enemy, but because he is allergic to dog hair.

Fuck this date spot, Mo Ran thinks, sniffing pathetically.

Sympathetically, Chu Wanning hands him a tissue. "If you're allergic, you shouldn't have come."

Mo Ran snorts. "And miss seeing what a creep Nangong Si is? Dream on!"

Chu Wanning mutters something under his breath that suspiciously sounds like he's calling Mo Ran a creep instead, but this is Chu Wanning — he wouldn't make such jokes. He wouldn't joke around with Mo Ran, period.

"Dogs..." Mo Ran mutters. "So much fur and so clingy. What's so good about... achoo!"

The dog Chu Wanning is playing with barks at them, as if laughing at Mo Ran. While Mo Ran suffers in agony, Chu Wanning is having the time of his life, getting along surprisingly well with the dogs. A yellow Shiba Inu even climbs on Chu Wanning's lap and starts snoozing.

Chu Wanning's usually stern eyes soften at the sight, and the corners of his mouth tug into a small smile. Mo Ran stops talking and stares, enraptured by the sight.

This is his first time seeing Chu Wanning smile. The sight is blinding, and Mo Ran feels as if he should look away to shield his eyes, but he can't turn even if his life depends on it.

Oh, fuck, Mo Ran thinks as he places his hand over his chest. His heart is beating very fast, irrationally so. *I think I have a heart problem. I'm going to die young.*

Mo Ran is so distracted by the sight of Chu Wanning smiling he forgets to keep a low profile. Not a minute longer, Ye Wangxi, who *should* have been paying attention on her date, spots them, and makes her way over to them with that irritating Nangong Si in tow.

"Mo Ran, Chu-qianbei," she says. "What a coincidence... again. You're here for a date too?"

Uh oh. As usual, Ye Wangxi is too sharp for her own good. Quickly, Mo Ran scrambles for an excuse. "Yeah! We came today because we're thinking of adopting a..."

"A cat," he says. At the same time, Chu Wanning says, "A dog."

They glare at each other. Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si glance between them uneasily.

"Haha, *baobei*, you're SO funny," Mo Ran says, his voice acidly sweet. "Of course we're going to get a cat for our future house... I'm allergic to dogs, *remember?*"

He lets out a timely sneeze, punctuating his sentence.

Chu Wanning's phoenix eyes narrow into slits. "Medical science is advanced. Allergies can be sidestepped."

The dog snoozing on Chu Wanning's lap wakes up and runs away. Before Mo Ran can retort something witty about his cruel lover caring about dogs more than his well being, Ye Wangxi steps in. "We're... staying in student accommodations right now. The rules forbid keeping pets."

"That's why I said future house," Mo Ran says loudly. "When we graduate and start a new life together. Isn't that right, Wanning?"

Chu Wanning flinches. He bows his head, suddenly fascinated by the yellow fur stuck to his pants, shielding his face from view.

Nangong Si makes a questioning noise. "You're already thinking about your future house?"

"Yeah??" Mo Ran shoots him an incredulous look. "Haven't you met someone you can see a future with?"

To appear every bit the loving couple he is supposed to be with Chu Wanning, he wraps an arm around Chu Wanning, who is doing his best impression of a stiff corpse.

"Yeah..." Nangong Si says in the most fucking sappy voice Mo Ran has ever heard in his life. He looks at Ye Wangxi with undisguised affection and fondness, and Mo Ran resists the urge to throw up.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Chu Wanning give Nangong Si a look that can be only described as judgemental. He catches Chu Wanning's eye and purely on instinct, shoots him a smirk.

To his immense surprise, the corner of Chu Wanning's mouth lifts.

No fucking way, Mo Ran thinks. *Did I just make a private joke with Chu? Wanning?*

“Glad you feel the same,” Mo Ran says loudly to stamp those thoughts. “Because that’s me and Wanning. A future. Together, both of us. Isn’t that right, baobei?”

Chu Wanning, after freezing like a deer caught in headlights, nods. He looks like he’d rather die than have a future with Mo Ran. Ye Wangxi is giving them another thoughtful look.

...They have to do something about this.

“...You want us to *what*?”

“We should practice kissing,” Mo Ran says patiently.

Chu Wanning’s fight or flight instincts look like they’re about to kick in, so Mo Ran quickly explains: if they’re going to sell their fake dating cover, Chu Wanning *needs* to stop running off every time Mo Ran tries to put up a display of public affection.

And to do that, Chu Wanning needs to grow comfortable kissing Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning is still looking at him doubtfully.

But Mo Ran is prepared. He pulls his trump card. “Chu-*qianbei*, don’t tell me you’re... scared?”

It works instantaneously. Chu Wanning’s eyes narrow, a competitive light gleaming in them as he declares, “Bring it on.”

Despite his bravado, he still flinches when Mo Ran cups his face and tilts his head up for a chaste kiss.

And *wow*. Chu Wanning absolutely *sucks* at kissing.

Mo Ran breaks the kiss. Well, he expected that to be the case — he bets Chu Wanning doesn’t get much practice to perfect the art of kissing. What he doesn’t expect, however, is to be slightly... turned on? By Chu Wanning’s obvious inexperience.

An odd expression makes its way on his face.

“Again,” Chu Wanning demands, misunderstanding Mo Ran’s expression.

Before Mo Ran can explain that no, he wasn’t making fun of him, Chu Wanning rises on the tips of his toes and kisses Mo Ran again.

Chu Wanning kisses timidly, but from the way Chu Wanning slots his lips against his and applies just the right amount of pressure, it’s obvious he is learning from what Mo Ran did. Mo Ran even feels a bit sorry when Chu Wanning breaks the kiss, wishing it was longer.

“...Again.”

At their fourth kiss, Mo Ran is not sure who is the one who initiates it, but by then, he no longer has the capacity to *think*. How could he, when Chu Wanning’s lips are pliantly melding against his, his fingers cautiously curling around Mo Ran’s biceps?

And because he no longer can think, he loses himself in Chu Wanning, taking Chu Wanning with him across their living room and to their couch while kissing him the whole time.

Fuck. Mo Ran barely suppresses a groan as he somehow ends up sprawled across the couch, Chu Wanning straddling his lap. He shifts, accidentally rolling his hips against Mo Ran — and Mo Ran finds himself in literally a hard place.

Chu Wanning freezes when Mo Ran’s heated length presses against his thigh, and...

...he lets out a stifled moan.

Fuck, Mo Ran thinks again, with feeling.

He abruptly sits up, wrapping his arms around Chu Wanning and kissing him harder. Chu Wanning resists for a split second, before becoming boneless in Mo Ran’s embrace, and Mo Ran is about to do something very stupid like asking if he can fuck Chu Wanning, pretty please, when—

“A-Ran?”

They break apart, looking at each other with dazed expressions. Mo Ran is confused — he *swears* he heard his childhood friend’s voice, but... Shi Mei is studying overseas?

“...A-Ran.” Shi Mei’s voice is loud and clear. “*Did you call me when you’re in the middle of having sex.*”

Chu Wanning is staring at his crotch area. He coughs, his ears red as he whispers, “...Your phone.”

“Oh!” Mo Ran quickly fishes his phone out of his pocket and realises with dread that he has accidentally dialled Shi Mei’s number while making out with Chu Wanning.

“Hi, Shi Mei!” Mo Ran says faux-cheerfully. “I accidentally called you while I was, uh, busy! Haha! How’s it going?”

There is silence over the line and Mo Ran is contemplating hanging up when Shi Mei says, “...A-Ran, do you know that it’s four in the morning right now?”

“O-Oh, timezones, huh?”

“I just closed my eyes after finishing my anatomy report, and you but-dialed me while having sex?”

Mo Ran is about to protest that no, he was *not* having sex (as much as he wishes he was), when Shi Mei says, “*I will remember this.*”

And then the line goes dead.

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran spend the next few minutes in awkward silence, not looking at each other.

Well, at least that took care of his hard-on.

The days pass, and despite the previous awkwardness, Mo Ran manages to coax Chu Wanning into practising with him again.

And again. And again.

After more kisses than Mo Ran can count, he is both very horny and confused, but at least one good thing comes out of it — Chu Wanning gets used to it. He no longer shies away from (appropriate) public displays of affections, and when Mo Ran wraps an arm around his waist in front of Ye Wangxi on times when she catches them ‘coincidentally’ at some of her dates, Chu Wanning stops running.

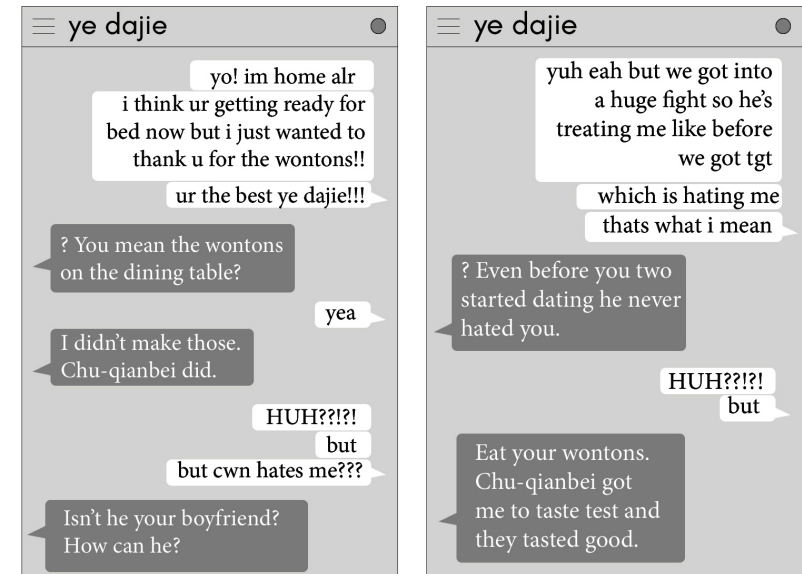
They manage to fool everyone.

In between pretending to date Chu Wanning, practicing kissing with him when Ye Wangxi is not around, spying on Ye Wangxi’s dates, life goes on. The days slowly blend together, and after a particularly grueling full day of classes and work, Mo Ran trudges back home.

Before he makes a beeline to his room and collapses on his bed, he stops at the sight of a thermal flask on the table, with a simple post-it note on it: ‘*For Mo Ran*’.

Mo Ran peers inside, and nearly cries from happiness at the sight of the still steaming hot wontons.

He immediately texts Ye Wangxi.



The wontons taste good. Very good, in fact. So good that Mo Ran can scarcely believe that Chu Wanning, kitchen disaster extraordinaire, cooked them. If not for Ye Wangxi’s strait-laced nature, Mo Ran would have thought she was pulling his leg!

The wontons, carefully placed in a thermal flask to keep warm until Mo Ran was back, coupled with Ye Wangxi’s text, are more than enough to send Mo Ran into what he can only describe as cognitive dissonance.

Chu Wanning hates him! In fact, if it isn’t for them pretending to date, Chu Wanning wouldn’t even *talk* to him.

Mo Ran is sure of that. Back when Chu Wanning first moved in, Mo Ran had been nothing but friendly to him, despite him being skittish and shy. One morning, roughly a month after Chu Wanning moved

in, he suddenly yelled that Mo Ran was “deficient by nature, beyond remedy” — words that people used to say about him.

“*Deficient*,” his peers in high schools whispered, sneering at him.

“*Beyond remedy*,” his teachers and employers said, shaking their heads.

Chu Wanning repeated those words that tormented his youth. And Mo Ran had been *only* trying to offer him a plate of jianbing! Since then, he was convinced Chu Wanning looked down on him — for his problematic past, for his ruffian-like ways, for needing a part-time job to fund his tuition...

Mo Ran had only expected better of Chu Wanning.

Hence, Mo Ran started antagonising Chu Wanning, arguing with him at any given opportunity — until they got to their current, turbulent relationship.

And now, alone in the kitchen at night and eating the last wonton Chu Wanning cooked specially for him to have after his shift... Mo Ran tastes an emotion he can't quite name at the tip of his tongue.

A few days later when Mo Ran is on shift, the boba house's doorbell jingles, signalling Chu Wanning's arrival. Chu Wanning elegantly sweeps in, turning heads as always as he makes his way to the front and slides into the counter seat. Before he can open his mouth and ask why Mo Ran arranged to meet him, Mo Ran pushes a tooth-rotting, sweet brown sugar concoction across the counter.

“Your favourite,” Mo Ran says, flashing him his winning smile — the one with the dimples. “Freshly brewed by yours truly, and on the house.”

Chu Wanning eyes the drinks with the same sparkling eyes from that time Mo Ran cooked dinner for them. Then he looks at Mo Ran in confusion.

“You asked to meet me... to treat me to boba?”

Mo Ran nods.

“...Why?”

“To thank you for the wontons. From the other night,” Mo Ran says. His mother always taught him to repay debts and kindness tenfold, and he is doing that right now.

“Oh.” Chu Wanning lowers his face. “...It was nothing.”

“Why didn't you tell me they were from you?” Mo Ran asks.

“...” Chu Wanning fiddles with the straw wrapper, winding it around his finger. “I was worried you wouldn't eat them if you knew they were from me.”

“What?” Mo Ran asks in confusion. “Why wouldn't I? We're partners in crime for *Operation: Break-Up Wangsi!*” To lighten the mood, Mo Ran jokes, “We're *boyfriends*, right?”

Chu Wanning's head snaps up, and Mo Ran notices that the tips of his ears are red. But before he can say anything, they are interrupted by a couple walking by the counter.

“Oh, Mo Ran!” The girl cordially smiles. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Mo Ran smiles back politely. “It's been a while!”

When she and her boyfriend leave, Mo Ran drops his smile and frowns in confusion. “Huh... She's kinda familiar... But I don't remember who...”

Chu Wanning suddenly speaks. “How can it be? You— you had an affair with her?”

“I WHAT?” Mo Ran exclaims. “Since when?!”

Chu Wanning is staring at him. “You... you brought her back to the apartment before, at the start of the year?” He fumbles with his boba, nearly dropping it as he mutters, “...her name is Luo Xianxian.”

The name triggers Mo Ran's memory.

Turns out, at the very start of the semester, he had a class project with Luo Xianxian. She was in the midst of moving in with her boyfriend, and hadn't secured her accommodations yet. Wanting to quickly submit the project, he brought her back to the apartment to work on it.

But Chu Wanning misunderstood. Back then, he had just moved in, and knew nothing about Mo Ran beyond his notorious high school ‘reputation’ (no thanks to that no good Nangong Si). So when he saw Mo Ran coming back home with a pretty girl, Chu Wanning immediately jumped to conclusions.

"I thought..." Chu Wanning mumbles. "...that she was a one-night stand. And I knew she was attached."

That day, Chu Wanning was so enraged that he locked himself in his room, missing the sight of them innocently working on their assignment outside.

And the next morning, when Mo Ran tried to offer Chu Wanning breakfast, Chu Wanning snapped that he was 'deficient by nature, beyond remedy'.

"Oh." Mo Ran finally *sees*. "So... that's why you set the no overnight guest rule?"

Chu Wanning nods, the flush spreading from his ears to his face. "...I assumed you would be bringing back your... *affairs* home often. I was wrong." He drops his voice to a whisper. "...Now I know you're not that kind of person."

Mo Ran's head is reeling. All this time, all the arguments and fights... were over a mere misunderstanding?

Unable to help himself, Mo Ran throws his head back and laughs, long and hard. Chu Wanning looks up, startled at first, before his phoenix eyes narrow into a glare.

"What's so funny!" he snaps. He may be glaring daggers at Mo Ran, but the effect is rather ruined by the blush on his cheeks.

"No, it's just..." Mo Ran gives one last wheeze, wiping a stray tear from the corner of his eye before confessing, "I've always thought you said that because you looked down on me."

"What?" Now it's Chu Wanning's turn to look confused. "Why would I?"

"I..." Mo Ran pauses. He has long dreamt of this moment: when he would tell Chu Wanning all about how badly he treated him and how he's a filthy *classist* who looked down on him.

But now? He has spent months with Chu Wanning. Now, he too knows what kind of person Chu Wanning is — and isn't. All the lines he ardently practised for in the shower and gyms and late nights, all the words he will use to *rip* into Chu Wanning... disappear.

Chu Wanning... really isn't the bad person Mo Ran thought he was, not at all.

And that's when Mo Ran comes to a startling conclusion — he has stopped feeling as if he hated Chu Wanning, ever since they started 'dating'.

"I dunno," Mo Ran finally lamely says. "I thought you would hate me for... being myself."

Before Mo Ran can explain the way people treated him before and how it led to deep-rooted insecurities, Chu Wanning says, "I've always admired how hardworking you are. Mo Ran is the hardest worker I know."

Mo Ran lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding. Suddenly, he feels... lighter. As if a burden he has been carrying on his shoulders this whole time has finally lifted.

Just when he is about to say something, *anything*, that no-good Nangong Si appears with Ye Wangxi. In a blink of an eye, it's already time for Mo Ran to change shifts with Ye Wangxi for the day.

Since when did time pass so fast when I'm with Chu Wanning? Mo Ran muses.

"What are you two talking about?" Nangong Si asks.

"Your face," Mo Ran immaturely retorts.

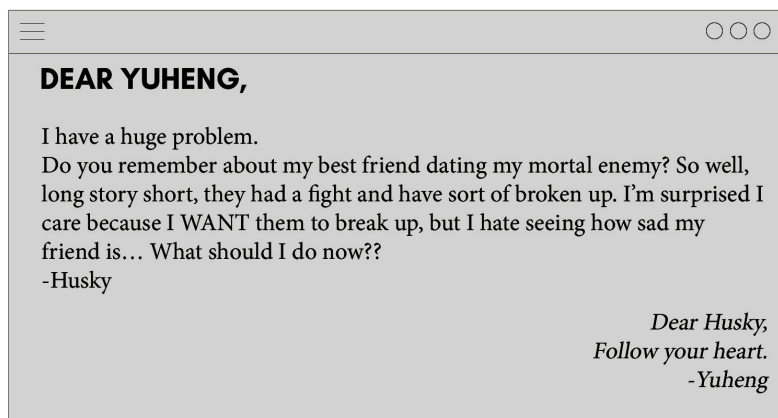
Ye Wangxi rolls her eyes, giving Nangong Si's hand a squeeze before walking behind the counter and pulling on her apron.

As Mo Ran makes his way around the counter to Chu Wanning, Ye Wangxi gives them a look. "Date? Here?"

"Hell *yeah*." Mo Ran reacts quickly, grabbing Chu Wanning's hands. "We CANNOT get enough of each other, even when I'm at work."

Chu Wanning rolls his eyes, but he convincingly leans into Mo Ran's embrace. Ye Wangxi's eyes soften and Nangong Si mimes gagging. Mo Ran makes a vague throat-slitting motion when Nangong Si turns away from them. Chu Wanning catches Mo Ran's eye and they share a private look, before Mo Ran breaks into a grin.

And for reasons Mo Ran doesn't quite understand, his heart squeezes when Chu Wanning offers a small smile back.



Wow, *Yuheng*, Mo Ran thinks as he reads Yuheng's latest reply over breakfast. He takes another bite of his baozi, in awe at how the columnist is able to evoke such feelings in him with such concise words.

After considering Yuheng's advice for a minute, he looks up from his phone and at Chu Wanning, who is seated across the table quietly drinking soymilk.

"Chu-qianbei," he says. "We should get Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi to reconcile."

Last week, Ye Wangxi came home early from her date night and locked herself in her room. After coaxing and threatening and some help from Chu Wanning, Mo Ran finally pieced together what happened — Nangong Si's father wants Nangong Si to date a rich heiress of a skincare company (something about the company's best interests). Ye Wangxi, hailing from a humble background with her only guardian passing away when she was in high school, decided to stop seeing Nangong Si after hearing his father's wishes. Nangong Si blew up, leading to a huge fallout.

It's what Mo Ran wanted. It's what he went through all that insanity for, from spying on their dates and pretending to date Chu Wanning.

Ye Wangxi claims it's for the best, but...

Mo Ran sees the way Ye Wangxi retreats to her room every day. Sometimes, when Mo Ran passes by her room and looks through the slightly ajar door, she is hugging the stupid wolf plushie Nangong Si bought for her.

"I think Nangong Si thought that Ye Wangxi didn't care enough about them," Mo Ran says. "When she's stepping back *precisely* because she cares. Too bad that idiot doesn't get it."

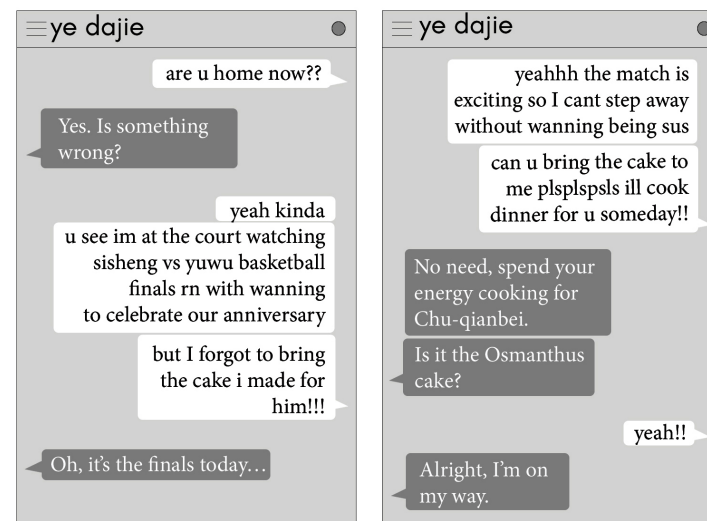
"...That's exactly what Nangong Si thought," Chu Wanning says slowly. "You are very similar to him, actually."

Mo Ran would have been affronted by that, but it makes him pause. "Wait... You're similar to Ye Wangxi..."

Chu Wanning draws his brows together, but Mo Ran started pacing around the kitchen.

Yes. Chu Wanning is a genius. The two of them *are* like Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi! With that, Mo Ran begins to plot.

What would he do if Chu Wanning was angry at him?



Ye Wangxi, as reliable as always, makes it to the court in ten minutes. Mo Ran waves her over to where he and Chu Wanning are seated, taking the cake from her with a smile.

After much discussion with Mo Ran and Chu Wanning, Nangong Si has a plan to win Ye Wangxi back today during the basketball finals — they just need to get her there.

Ye Wangxi looks towards the court, and upon seeing Nangong Si, her expression shutters. She is just about to leave when someone yells.

“XIAO YEZI!!”

Her head snaps up. Nangong Si is standing before the hoop, holding onto the basketball.

“A-Si...?”

“This is for you, Xiao Yezi!” he shouts before making the shot.

The ball falls in an arc towards the hoop and—
—he misses the shot.

There is dead silence until everyone explodes.

“NANGONG SI!!” the team leader roars.

“I did it for LOVE—”

“You USELESS SIMP—”

Amidst the uproar, Ye Wangxi starts laughing. Nangong Si stops arguing with his teammates and stands there, smiling foolishly at Ye Wangxi until his team leader slaps him on the back of his head.

“Make the next shot, Nangong, and don’t miss it this time!”

Miraculously, Nangong Si scores the next shot. The game resumes, and in no time at all, Sisheng emerges victorious.

The crowd cheers. Mo Ran whistles and Chu Wanning claps. The players scream, giving each other high fives and hugs.

There is sudden feedback when Nangong Si grabs the mic, and everyone shrinks back momentarily. The team glares daggers at Nangong Si, and he only sheepishly apologises before yelling—

“YE WANGXI, PLEASE BE MY GIRLFRIEND!”

The referee furiously blows his whistle before chasing a running Nangong Si around the court.

Not for the first time that whole day, Mo Ran thanks his lucky stars he is not publicly associated with that idiot. He could have been a Nangong, too. Chu Wanning would have thought he was an idiot beyond remedy, for real.

Ye Wangxi, another fool in love, only laughs helplessly. Then she cups her hands around her mouth as she shouts, “Okay! Stop running!”

Nangong Si whoops. He tosses the mic back and charges up the spectator stand. Then, barely crossing by Mo Ran and leaning over Chu Wanning’s body, Nangong Si kisses Ye Wangxi.

The Sisheng players wolf-whistle. The crowd cheers, again. Mo Ran shudders, and Chu Wanning’s mouth twists into the smallest grimace as he tactfully scoots closer to Mo Ran. Mo Ran flashes him a dimpled smile as their knees bump against each other, miming gagging as Nangong Si wraps Ye Wangxi in a hug.

“Ew, hets,” Mo Ran whispers.

Chu Wanning hears it. He catches Mo Ran’s eye and they share yet another one of their private looks with each other — one they frequently shared this whole ‘operation’ — and with a start, Mo Ran realises—

This is the last time he will ever share such a look with Chu Wanning.

From the start, they faked a relationship to make it easier for them to spy on Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si. Now that Nangong Si has proven his worth and he’s reconciled with Ye Wangxi... their whole operation ceases to exist.

They don’t need to pretend to date anymore.

This knowledge makes him sad. It hangs around him like a dark cloud for the rest of the day, even after Nangong Si whisks Ye Wangxi away for a ‘late night rendezvous’, even after Mo Ran bids Chu Wanning good night and retires to his room.

He lies on his bed, unable to sleep. *After tonight... I will no longer be Chu Wanning’s boyfriend, huh?*

A knock on his bedroom door jolts him out of his thoughts.

Frowning, he calls, “Come in.”

The door creaks open and Chu Wanning walks in. He smells faintly of his haitang shampoo and looks impossibly soft in his oversized home clothes.

“Wanning,” Mo Ran greets. “What can I do for you?”

“...Yours. I came to return it.” He shows Mo Ran the jacket he lent him earlier when the sun set. The game was still ongoing, and Mo Ran feared that it would be too cold for him.

Chu Wanning's too-wide collar shifts, slipping down one shoulder and revealing his collarbone. Mo Ran swallows, his eyes hungrily tracing Chu Wanning's bare skin.

Mo Ran clears his throat. "Uh. Thanks."

A beat of silence passes between them. Chu Wanning fidgets while Mo Ran fumbles with his jacket. Then, they speak at the same time.

"Mo Ran—"

"Wanning—"

Chu Wanning shakes his head and gestures for Mo Ran to go first.

"Uh." Mo Ran doesn't know what to say. "So. Ye-dajie and that Nangong-shaoye, huh?"

"Yeah."

Another minute passes. Mo Ran forces his tongue to move and brain to think, and blurts out, "So, this is the last night we... are dating, huh?"

"Yeah," Chu Wanning whispers.

They stare at each other silently for a few more seconds, and Mo Ran doesn't know who made the first move, but the next thing he knows, they are reaching for each other, tumbling into Mo Ran's bed as they begin to kiss.

In a frenzy of kisses, surging bodies, and heated touches, Mo Ran lets his brain go offline. When the fog over his mind finally clears, Chu Wanning is lying under him, naked and flushed, his slender legs trembling around Mo Ran's waist.

"Wait, wait," Mo Ran gasps. He needs a minute to process this because... *Fuck*. Is this... really happening?

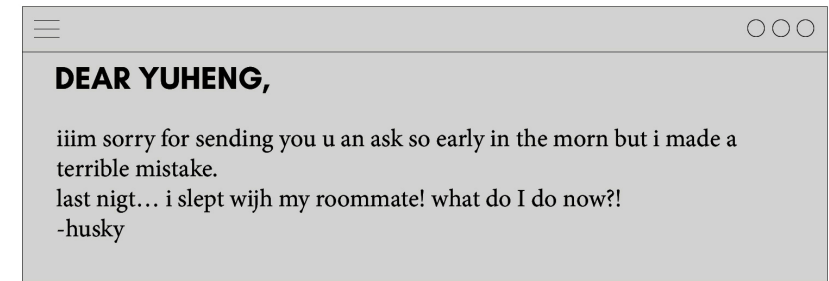
"A-Are... Are you sure?" he stammers. "Is this okay?"

Chu Wanning's hair is sprawled all over his pillow like an ink stain. Chu Wanning glares at him venomously with teary phoenix eyes, and somehow, the sight makes him even harder.

"You waited till now to ask?" Chu Wanning snaps. "Either get on with it, or get the hell out."

His voice cracks at the end, and well. Mo Ran is but a simple man.

That night, Mo Ran does what Chu Wanning told him to do, over and over again.



In the shower, not for the first time since he woke up, Mo Ran berates himself.

Somehow, over the course of the last few weeks, Mo Ran has realised he really, *really* liked Chu Wanning, and he was planning to win him over with proper dates before dating him, for real. But before any of those plans became a reality, Mo Ran screwed up his chances by treating Chu Wanning like a one-night stand, a fuck buddy, a fleeting fling — all of the things that Chu Wanning hates.

And all because he couldn't control his dick.

You're really just a fucking dog! he thinks furiously. For good measure, Mo Ran punches the shower wall.

After he finishes up his shower with a throbbing fist, Mo Ran feels calmer. He may have made a mistake, but he can fix it! He decides he will start making it up to Chu Wanning by cooking him a special breakfast.

But when he gets out of the shower, Chu Wanning is no longer in bed.

In fact, Chu Wanning has left the house. And he does not return home until late at night, after Mo Ran already fell asleep on the couch while trying to wait for him. When Mo Ran wakes up the next morning, Chu Wanning is long gone again.

The only trace of Chu Wanning is the jacket Mo Ran finds draped around him. He buries his face in it, inhaling deeply.

It smells like haitang blossoms.

On the third day, Mo Ran wakes up on the couch, failing to catch Chu Wanning yet again, he has to face the truth — Chu Wanning is avoiding him.

It's not like Mo Ran doesn't try. He reaches out to Chu Wanning via texts and calls (that he ignores), he tries to find him at his lab ("Sorry sir, no unauthorised personnel allowed in."), and he tries staying up the whole night. But Chu Wanning evades all his efforts, and Mo Ran is starting to question if Chu Wanning even comes home.

Mo Ran feels absolutely gutted. He ruined his chances with Chu Wanning before he even got one, and... for what?

And that's how Ye Wangxi finds him (after her date, *fuck* couples in love), slumped over the kitchen island with his head in his hands.

"What happened?" she asks. "Got into a fight with Chu-qianbei?"

In his hollowness, he confesses, "We were never together in the first place."

To his surprise, Ye Wangxi doesn't even bat an eyelid. "I know."

Mo Ran's head snaps up as he stares at her in shock.

She rolls her eyes. "Mo Ran, you and Chu-qianbei aren't the best actors." Her lips quirk up. "Although your kissing performances fooled A-Si."

And Mo Ran may never kiss Chu Wanning in this lifetime, ever again. He is going to cry.

"Talk to me," Ye Wangxi says gently, as if they are back in high school and Mo Ran needed a wakeup call from his senior. "Talking about things helps."

Mo Ran does. It is as if the floodgates opened. Mo Ran tells her *everything* — from how they started fake dating to spy on Nangong Si and her, how he got closer to Chu Wanning during their whole 'operation', and how he fell for Chu Wanning... and ruined his chances. Ye Wangxi listens quietly the whole time, nodding encouragingly.

"...And even Yuheng — you know, the advice columnist from the Sisheng blog — ghosted me, after I sent multiple asks about my love dilemma!!" Mo Ran resists the urge to pound his fists against the counter in regret. "I am going to be heartbroken and single forever!"

At that point, Ye Wangxi's expression turns odd. "...Mo Ran, do you know what the Sisheng Literature Club does?"

"Sisheng Literature Club?" Mo Ran echoes. He wrecks his brain. "That's the one Wanning is in, right...?"

Ye Wangxi nods.

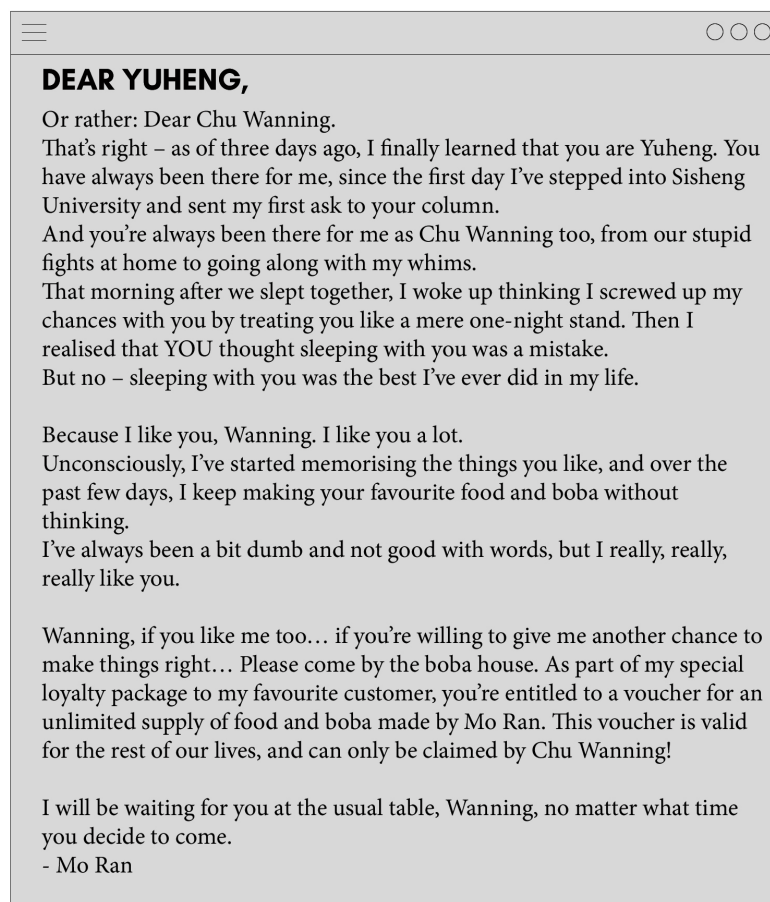
"I dunno... They read, I guess? Write poems?"

"..." Ye Wangxi sighs heavily. "No, the literature club runs a blog. *The Sisheng blog*."

Mo Ran feels as if cold water is dumped all over him. He stares at Ye Wangxi with wide eyes, not daring to even breathe.

"Mo Ran, Chu Wanning is Yuheng."

That's when Mo Ran knows he *really* screwed up. Big time.



That day, after spending ages reflecting, drafting, and rewriting the ask he submitted to the column, Mo Ran waits at the boba house. And he waits and waits, all the way until closing.

Just as he is about to admit defeat and resign himself to a Chu Wanning-less fate, he suddenly appears. The doorbell jingles, and they never sounded more heavenly as they do now.

And Chu Wanning has never looked more beautiful.

Mo Ran's heart is skipping a beat, and he allows himself to feel a glimmer of hope. "Wanning, you... You came."

Chu Wanning's cold gaze gives away nothing, but as he tucks a stray strand of hair behind his ears, Mo Ran sees it — a tinge of red at the top of his ears.

Mo Ran's heart is beating faster, and every beat is calling Wanning, Wanning, and *Wanning*.

"Wanning," Mo Ran says, stepping around the counter. He is gravitating towards Chu Wanning, as if there is an invisible string pulling him over, and Mo Ran has long given up trying to fight it.

"Does this mean... Does this mean that you...?" he asks hopefully.

Chu Wanning scoffs, turning his head away. "I only came for free boba."

If this was a few weeks ago, Mo Ran would have been crushed.

However, weeks have passed, and Mo Ran has now a tacit understanding of Chu Wanning, of how to read his body language and everything Chu Wanning. And he sees it — Chu Wanning's red ears, the flush spreading from his neck, and his trembling fists.

Chu Wanning likes him too.

At that, Mo Ran feels giddy and impossibly happy. He allows a stupid smile to stretch from ear to ear as he answers, "I drank the last boba just a minute ago. So if you want it... you have to kiss me."

Chu Wanning's head snaps towards him, his face darkening. "Is this what you offer to all your customers?"

"No, only you," Mo Ran says earnestly. "Because I like *you*, Chu Wanning."

Chu Wanning's face floods red. Mo Ran wants to kiss him, badly.

But he waits. This time, he will wait for Chu Wanning.

"Shut up," Chu Wanning commands.

"No," Mo Ran stubbornly says. "I said it to you in my ask and I'll say it again, as many times as I need to. I like you, Wanning, I really, really—"

He never finishes his sentence, for Chu Wanning closes the gap between him, yanking him by the front of his apron, and shutting him up with a kiss.

Immediately, all rational thoughts fly out of Mo Ran's head. He wraps his arms around Chu Wanning, scared that he will bolt. Pliantly, Chu Wanning lets himself be held, and Mo Ran marvels at how perfectly he fits in his arms, as if he was made for Mo Ran.

He kisses Chu Wanning fervently, trying to let his kisses and touch convey all the feelings he had for Chu Wanning.

And Chu Wanning kisses him back.

Since their first meeting, they have never been good with words, and they have always failed to reach a common understanding. But that night, as they kissed in the empty shop for a long, long time, Mo Ran is sure of one thing.

Chu Wanning likes him too, and for as long as he'll have him, he is now truly, wholly *his*.

After they start dating (for real!), Mo Ran brings Chu Wanning on all the dates he planned on.

Chu Wanning calls it a waste. "We're already together," he protests.

"Baobei," Mo Ran says, linking their fingers together and smiling at the way Chu Wanning's ears turn red. "I want to make you mine."

"...But I'm already yours."

They end up spending the rest of the day in Mo Ran's room.

Nobody except Ye Wangxi knows that they were previously pretending to date, so everyone finds Mo Ran treating Chu Wanning well nothing special. To them, it's just how things have always been.

As it should: being with Chu Wanning feels *natural*. It feels natural to kiss him first thing in the morning, to pick him up when classes end, to make boba for him during his shift, to cook his favourite food for dinner, and to test the limits of their bed together nightly.

“You know, Mo Ran,” Ye Wangxi says one weekend when Chu Wanning is still sleeping in. “Can you please be considerate of your other roommate? ... The walls are thin.”

Mo Ran has only left Chu Wanning’s warmth to prepare breakfast in bed for them. He scoffs. “Just move in with Nangong Si already, Ye-dajie. Leave me and Wanning be.”

Dating Chu Wanning feels good.

He looks at Chu Wanning the same way Nangong Si looks at Ye Wangxi — like he hung up the moon and the stars, like he is his everything.

Chu Wanning catches him looking one day. “What are you looking at?”

“You.”

“...Shameless!”

He looks away in embarrassment, but his hand shyly reaches for Mo Ran’s.

Mo Ran is content.

Above all, he is grateful to Nangong Si — because in a way, he was the one that helped tie Chu Wanning to Mo Ran, and they will remain tied together, for the rest of their lives.

Our Token of Love Burns Red

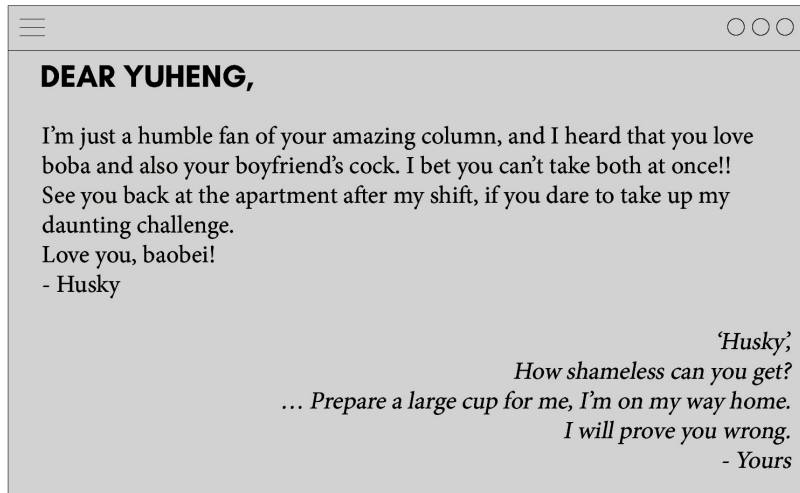
BY LANA

First impressions are everything. They’re why Chu Wanning, who once didn’t care what anyone thought of him, is now more careful in how he presents himself. They’re why Chu Wanning, who would rather righteously discipline a family of high status than sit around and have tea with them, now expresses his dislike in the form of cold glares instead.

Once upon a time, Chu Wanning didn’t have to care about first impressions. Now, as the Imperial Chancellor to King Xue Zhengyong, things are different. As King Xue’s greatest advisor, he’s had to restrain himself, more for the image of the kingdom than for himself. It’s the reason he now makes it a point to remain neutral upon first meetings, not giving the other party any commonality or resentment to take advantage of, not building or breaking relationships too quickly.

He’s slipped up three times.

The first time Chu Wanning met Xue Meng, he listened quietly to the younger boy’s enthusiastic decree that Chu Wanning would be his teacher, for everything from sword fighting to the snooze-worthy politics of the kingdom. Chu Wanning unknowingly let a small smile slip, which everyone in the room had caught. From that moment on, he was heavily teased for his soft spot for their darling prince.



The first time Chu Wanning met Nangong Liu, he scowled at the man's artificial compliments; Nangong Liu looked like he'd happily abandon his own family for an opportunity to squeeze into the higher ranks. Chu Wanning had refused to shake his hand, instead regarding Nangong Liu's existence as a stain on their kingdom. Really, the fight that broke out after that was to be expected.

The first time Chu Wanning met Mo Ran, he slapped him across the face.

It's a day that starts like any other, except Chu Wanning and Xue Meng eventually find themselves pulling up to a small farming village just outside the capital in a carriage that jostles wildly on an uneven dirt road.

Earlier that morning, after being subjected to hours of lessons on trade, Xue Meng asked if they could include something in his training that would give him more real-world experience.

"Not that Shizun's lessons are boring," Xue Meng had been quick to explain. "I just think that meeting more of the people we lead would be helpful."

Chu Wanning doesn't push Xue Meng on the very obvious fact that he does think the lessons are boring, mostly because Chu Wanning agrees. Really, Xue Meng shouldn't be stuck in a room during his prime. There would always be time to read and memorize laws, but the opportunity to travel and explore would only lessen.

And, if he's being honest, his agreement is partially for selfish reasons. Chu Wanning had once been a wandering man, providing whatever support he could to the random villages he came across. After becoming the Imperial Chancellor and getting a whole new set of responsibilities, he no longer had time, but the itch to go back to his roots never went away. Now, with Xue Meng advocating for much of the same thing, he can kill two birds with one stone.

That's how Chu Wanning finds himself pitching the idea to Xue Zhengyong, and after some very enthusiastic agreement (more for him than Xue Meng, Chu Wanning notices with mild confusion, and major annoyance), Yuliang Village is where they end up.

When Chu Wanning steps out of the carriage, the first thing he notices is that it's hot. The heat in the air permeates his white robes and wears on him like a weight. It's a little suffocating, after having gotten used to the massive structures and greenery casting shade over every meter of the capital.

The second thing he notices is everyone within viewing distance staring at him in shock, some with their jaws on the floor. It makes Chu Wanning a little uncomfortable, being looked at like he's something otherworldly, but the tension quickly snaps when Xue Meng jumps out of the carriage with a loud yawn.

"Why's it so quiet?" the prince asks.

His presence spurs an elderly lady into action. She walks up to them and bows. "Prince Xue, Imperial Chancellor Chu, it's an honor," she says, and the people around her mimic her greeting. "To what do we owe this visit? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Xue Meng says. He crosses his arms over his chest and grins, reciting his much-rehearsed (ten times on the way here; Chu Wanning had counted) speech about the importance of being active in civilian lives.

"You'd like to help out?" The elderly lady blinks in astonishment. "That's very generous, but please don't trouble yourselves. Surely there are more important ways you can use your time..."

Chu Wanning had figured this would happen, so he's quick to stop the discussion before it even starts. After he insists they use Xue Meng for whatever they need, a sparkle lights in their eyes at the thought of having a youthful man to help with all the heavy lifting. In no time at all, Chu Wanning watches as Xue Meng is led away.

Now, he's left alone with the elderly woman who'd spoken up, and one other woman. The awkwardness builds as the seconds tick by, their eyes plastered on him in silence.

Chu Wanning finds himself unable to take much more of their staring, and his eyes flit to a stack of freshly harvested crops. Admittedly, Chu Wanning has never tried farming, his past self mostly focusing on upholding people's safety. Still, work is work. "You look like you were in the middle of harvesting these. I can continue."

The women look back and forth between Chu Wanning and the pile of wheat. "Imperial Chancellor Chu," one of them begins, a timid smile curling at her lips, "when you say that you'd like to help out, you mean by working in the fields?"

Chu Wanning had thought he'd make that clear from the beginning. What else is he meant to do here? Set up trading routes?

Before he can say as much, the other woman in the duo clicks her tongue and elbows her friend's side. "Don't be silly! How could you expect a man of his status to tend to our crops?"

The words make Chu Wanning's brow twitch. Weren't they just so eager to accept Xue Meng's help? Xue Zhengyong always jokes about how everyone seems to be more scared to talk to Imperial Chancellor Chu than their own King, but here, too? He hasn't frowned once since getting out of the carriage. "I'll do it," he says, crossing his arms behind his back. "Where are your tools?"

The women gape at Chu Wanning. He stands in wait, and it's only after his seriousness dawns on them that they, very cautiously, hand him a tool he can't even begin to guess the name or function of.

Whatever, he'll figure it out. With a hum, he gathers his robes in his hands and starts his trek across the muddy field.

Big mistake.

Chu Wanning misjudges the unevenness of the terrain and sinks his foot into a pit that's too deep for him to get out of. He knows this, because he tries, and then he trips, and then he plummets towards the ground face-first.

And then, miraculously, he stops. The impact that he braced for with a clenched jaw and eyes squeezed shut never comes. Instead, Chu Wanning feels a warmth circle his waist, breaking his fall, and the press of something sturdy against his back.

A frown tugs at Chu Wanning's lips, the situation so bizarre he doesn't process what's happening until he's flipped around. It's then he comes face-to-face with a set of vibrant eyes speckled with purple, a dimpled smile below them.

"Are you okay?" the man in front of him asks, the corner of his lips twitching as if trying not to laugh. He's clearly amused. Any other time,

Chu Wanning's annoyance would've flared. Now, he's trying to come to terms with the fact that a voice this deep exists.

Chu Wanning realizes his hand is braced against the man's chest. Against the man's warm chest. Against the man's warm, toned chest. Against the man's warm, toned, *bare* chest, and Chu Wanning's fingers twitch against his skin as he eyes a bead of sweat trailing down its expanse, and the man is too close, *much* too close, and Chu Wanning feels his breath against his skin, and—

And then Chu Wanning retracts his hand as if he's touched fire, and slaps the man across the face.

"I'm very sorry," Chu Wanning says for the tenth time as he stands in Mo Ran's home.

"It's fine."

"I didn't mean to do it," he continues, lamely. The mortification of people thinking the capital goes around smacking their civilians weighs down on him.

"Mm. I know."

Chu Wanning stares as Mo Ran, currently sitting on his bed and lounging against the wall behind it, presses a cool rag to his cheek. Chu Wanning wonders if it would be rude to ask for a rag, too. He feels like the slap caused him more harm than it did Mo Ran, the white of his palm stained a light pink.

"You just startled me," Chu Wanning mutters. "With your..." *Lack of clothing*, he doesn't want to say, because Mo Ran is still half-naked in front of him and he doesn't want to draw more attention to that fact than necessary.

"I get it." Mo Ran flashes him a smile. "I shouldn't have snuck up on you like that."

Mo Ran's sympathy only makes the guilt roll off Chu Wanning in waves. "I—"

"But," Mo Ran continues, his smile widening into a wolfish grin, "I do wonder what Imperial Chancellor Chu was planning on doing once he got out into the fields with only a spade in hand?"

Chu Wanning's brow twitches.

Maybe he shouldn't feel sorry for assaulting this man after all.

"What else would I plan on doing? I was going to help with the crops," Chu Wanning snaps, never having been one to tolerate jabs at his capabilities. Mo Ran's grin only grows wider and wider, and the sight of it makes Chu Wanning's ears flare red with embarrassment. Whatever filter he's tried to maintain completely shatters. "And you should be ashamed of yourself, off doing who knows what while the elderly are stuck harvesting the crops. With your physique, you could easily get through ten times more land ten times faster, and yet— Why are you laughing?!"

"Imperial Chancellor Chu," Mo Ran begins, clearing his throat, "I harvested all the crops today. I just asked if my tools could be held while I got some water."

Chu Wanning freezes.

"But I'm flattered that you think my physique—"

"Impudent!" Chu Wanning turns on his heels and makes for the door, needing some fresh air to combat the quickly rising temperature of his body. "Absolutely ridiculous. Never in my life have I met someone as insolent as—"

The words stop short in Chu Wanning's throat when he feels a large hand tug his own, spinning him back around. Upon getting a faceful of bare chest *again*, his nostrils flare and he rips his hand from Mo Ran's hold. "Don't touch me!"

"I meant no disrespect," Mo Ran says, and when Chu Wanning's gaze darts to his face, there's no more mischief sparkling in Mo Ran's eyes. His mouth tugs into a small frown. "I was just trying to lighten the mood, since you seemed so concerned about what happened."

When Chu Wanning doesn't respond right away, Mo Ran quickly adds, "I won't speak out of line again. I'm sorry."

Chu Wanning purses his lips, guiltily eyeing the nervous wrinkles on Mo Ran's forehead. In truth, Mo Ran didn't do anything *too* out of line outside of invading Chu Wanning's personal space more times in ten minutes than anyone else had all year, but his pride has already caused enough of a fuss to take it back. He mutters, "As long as you realize your mistakes."

Mo Ran's shoulders sag in relief. "I do. If I may ask, though... Were you really planning on working out in the fields?"

Again with the question. Chu Wanning clicks his tongue. "I didn't know this would be such an issue."

"It's not," Mo Ran assures. "It's just that you don't have to? I'm sure you have lots of other responsibilities, and given your status, maybe work as rough as this isn't—"

"If you want to bring up my status," Chu Wanning interrupts, irritation bubbling in his chest, "then you can bring up that it entails me helping this kingdom as much as I can. I'm not bound to whatever elegant work you think I do all day. If that's what being the Imperial Chancellor meant, I never would've taken the position."

Mo Ran falls silent, clearly not expecting that answer. Chu Wanning takes advantage of what seems to be a rare moment of speechlessness for the man. "If you don't need anything from me, fine," he says harshly. "But I'm not so incompetent I can't even help."

The continued silence annoys Chu Wanning, because Mo Ran must be trying to process through his thick head what he's just said. When the quiet stretches even further, Chu Wanning scoffs and angles his body towards the door to leave.

But he doesn't, because then Mo Ran's face relaxes into something soft, boyish, and a dimpled smile shapes his lips. "Then, Imperial Chancellor Chu, why don't you stay a bit longer so I can show you how to harvest crops?"

It probably would've been less embarrassing, the way the lessons crashed and burned, if Chu Wanning hadn't said "I'll get it on the first try" beforehand. Instead, he manages to get stuck in the mud three more times, and gets a face full of it when he shovels the ground too hard. As the night settles in and Chu Wanning looks half ready to snap a rake in half, Mo Ran suggests he come back the next week to try again.

"I'll be waiting," Mo Ran says, and Chu Wanning closes the curtain to his carriage right as he hears, "Safe travels, Imperial Chancellor Chu."

Chu Wanning spends much of the next week hunched over in the library, reading whatever he can on the basics of farming. Fifteen books and many skipped meals later, he hopes he'll now be better suited to help *and* less likely to embarrass himself in the process.

So when Chu Wanning returns the following week and drags a shovel into the fields, it's humiliating, the way he manages to trip over seemingly nothing *again* only to be caught by a pair of warm arms. At the feeling of a familiar grip around his waist, a jolt of electricity shoots up his spine, numbing his body.

At least Xue Meng, who a distance away can be heard being piled on by a bunch of children, seems to be having fun.

The next week isn't much better.

When Chu Wanning arrives in Yuliang, a smile awaits him as soon as he steps out of the carriage. Mo Ran extends a hand. "Imperial Chancellor Chu."

Chu Wanning eyes his hand, but ultimately decides not to take it. He gets out of the carriage on his own and stands with his back perfectly straight. "I'm ready."

Mo Ran grins. "Oh, are you?"

"I am."

"You studied?"

"It doesn't concern you."

"For how long?"

"Mo Ran," Chu Wanning snaps. "Just take me to the field."

So he does. Mo Ran hands him a spade and steps back, and Chu Wanning gets to work. He actually ends up making good progress in digging a trench, and turns to calmly rub it in Mo Ran's face. His breath catches in his throat at the sight of Mo Ran, though, his arms and back lined in a thin sheen of sweat, flexing as he swings a hoe up in the air and strikes it into the ground.

Chu Wanning fumbles over his footsteps, trips over a hole, and eats dirt.

The next week goes more smoothly, with Chu Wanning remaining upright the entire time, though that may have something to do with Mo Ran constantly insisting he rest under a tree. In any case, he and

Mo Ran manage to finish planting everything before the sun sets, and as they wait for Xue Meng to finish his own work, Mo Ran spends the rest of the day showing Chu Wanning the more scenic areas of Yuliang.

Chu Wanning almost doesn't agree to the tour, but he quickly finds himself engrossed in it. With no farming to try and be competitive about as he's shown around, Mo Ran's company becomes a surprisingly soothing one.

Really, these visits have become a nice breather from his daily work, and Chu Wanning finds himself looking forward to them more every week. At this point, there's nothing he can complain about.

Well, except one thing. One *person*, to be more accurate.

Ling-er.

Chu Wanning will admit she's an outgoing young lady with a natural charm, but he hadn't had much of an opinion of her when they'd met. Then Chu Wanning had noticed every time he visited, Ling-er would hang off of Mo Ran until she snatched him away for a chore she probably made up and likely didn't need help with. After that, his impression of her took a hit.

A month into his visits, it's still happening, and it's when he and Mo Ran are getting ready to pound rice cakes he hears a flowery giggle for the third time that day.

"Mo Ran!"

Chu Wanning's jaw tightens.

"I need your help by the well!"

Really? Can no one function without Mo Ran? If that's the case, it's clearly a good thing Chu Wanning and Xue Meng decided to come here, because god forbid the chaos that would erupt if Mo Ran ever fell sick.

Mo Ran throws Chu Wanning an apologetic look and tries to send Ling-er away, but she latches onto his arm and doesn't budge. The sight of it irks Chu Wanning, so he sends Mo Ran off with her for the sake of not having to see it anymore.

While Mo Ran is gone, Chu Wanning thinks. He can't just tell Ling-er to never bother them again, but he also doesn't know how much more of these distractions he can take. It's just not efficient, the way

she keeps interrupting them constantly, pulling Mo Ran away from their work.

So Chu Wanning makes an executive decision.

"From now on, you'll be my aide while I'm here," Chu Wanning announces when Mo Ran comes back, very purposefully avoiding his gaze. "It'll be inefficient if there's someone new showing me around every week."

"Oh?" Chu Wanning can so easily picture the shit-eating grin on Mo Ran's face.

Chu Wanning nods stiffly. "And this means it's troublesome if you're constantly being pulled away by..." *Ling-er*. "...people, so make sure it's arranged that someone else can be a point of contact while I'm here."

Mo Ran hums thoughtfully. "If Imperial Chancellor Chu says so, who am I to say no?"

So far so good. Chu Wanning figures he might as well use this opportunity to bring up something else that's been on his mind. "Imperial Chancellor Chu is too formal. When you address me, just use my name."

Mo Ran's eyes widen, and then they light up. "In that case, I'm honored to be your aide," he says with a voice deeper than usual, and leans in until their faces are but a breath away, until their gazes are forced to lock. "Chu Wanning."

Chu Wanning clicks his tongue, Mo Ran's gaze on him oddly intense, then turns as he feels the beginnings of a minuscule pounding in his chest.

Weird.

He'll get used to it before next time.

He doesn't get used to it.

When Chu Wanning next arrives in Yuliang, Mo Ran runs towards his carriage with a look on his face that spells trouble.

"Chu Wanning!" Mo Ran yells the name so loudly it makes him flinch. "You're here!"

Xue Meng gasps from beside him. "Did he— he just used your name, Shizun!"

"I let him," Chu Wanning explains, keeping his voice steady, suddenly wishing he'd told Mo Ran to save the informality for when it was just them. When Mo Ran stops in front of them, Chu Wanning shoots him a glare. "Did you have to yell?"

Mo Ran grins. "Sorry. I was just excited."

Chu Wanning's brow twitches. His chest does something strange. Must be the weather. "Forget it. What are we doing today?"

"Nothing," Mo Ran says. "We're celebrating."

Chu Wanning arches a brow. "Celebrating what?"

There was a marriage, it turns out. Chu Wanning had only spoken to the couple twice before, but anyone with eyes could tell what they felt for each other. It was evident in their shared glances, the way they laughed around the other, the soft and subtle touches they exchanged. Chu Wanning sees much of the same thing at the capital with Xue Zhengyong and Wang Chuqing.

"Come on." Mo Ran winks. "I'll take you over to them. It'll be fun."

Chu Wanning hesitates. Wouldn't that be awkward? He hasn't known them for long, and surely this is a celebration that should be kept to friends and family only. "I don't think that's— Mo Ran!"

Mo Ran grabs his hand and starts pulling him along, Xue Meng running after them with a loud "Hey!" Chu Wanning tries to get Mo Ran to at least slow down — he doesn't know what kind of sight the other villagers are getting right now, watching their Imperial Chancellor being dragged along in front of their eyes — but Mo Ran doesn't listen. His hand stays wrapped around Chu Wanning's, warm and calloused.

It takes a second for Chu Wanning to think to pull it back.

In truth, *fun* isn't exactly how Chu Wanning would describe the next few hours. He still feels a bit out of place, surrounded by people he's rarely, if ever, spoken to, but he can at least admit it's not a *bad* experience. Throughout the day, the tension in his shoulders eventually releases as the jumble of voices around him mellows out into something peaceful, and he finds himself getting swept up in the lighthearted mood. Mo Ran never leaves his side.

All too soon, the night settles in, and Mo Ran accompanies Chu Wanning on the walk back to his carriage. The atmosphere is peaceful,

serene. Crickets chirp the remaining sunlight away as a cool breeze tugs at their robes.

"Sorry you came down here for nothing," Mo Ran apologizes, "but I hope you still had a good time."

"It wasn't unpleasant," Chu Wanning admits. "If I'd known there'd been a wedding, though, I would've brought a gift."

"A gift from Chu Wanning himself? I'm jealous."

Chu Wanning rolls his eyes. "Don't be. I have nothing of value to give you, unless it's money you want."

Mo Ran laughs. "You think I'm after your fortunes?"

"What else would you want?" Chu Wanning asks, but Mo Ran doesn't answer. Instead, he stands by the carriage and watches as Chu Wanning steps in slowly, careful not to wake a sleeping Xue Meng already huddled in the corner, and takes the curtain in his hand.

"Safe travels, Chu Wanning," Mo Ran says, and slides it closed.

It's the day before Wang Chuqing's birthday. Xue Zhengyong holds a hair clip up into the light, a silver one lined with purple jewels, and hums. "What do you think, Meng-er? Will your mother like this?"

Xue Meng narrows his eyes as he scrutinizes the clip, then nods. "She always likes your gifts."

Xue Zhengyong laughs. "That's because your father is an excellent gift giver!" He pulls Xue Meng close. "Listen, Meng-er. One day, when you find someone to give your heart to, you're going to have to pay attention to what they like. Your mother isn't difficult to shop for, but some people are a little, uh, harder to figure out..."

Chu Wanning raises a brow when he sees Xue Zhengyong look his way.

Xue Zhengyong clears his throat. "And what do you think?"

Chu Wanning eyes the clip. "She'll appreciate it."

"Ah, I hope so." Xue Zhengyong carefully places the clip back into its pouch and tucks it away in his robes. "My pride is on the line."

Chu Wanning sets down the book he's reading, one he'd been using to plan future lessons for Xue Meng. "Everyone knows you're considerate with your gifts."

"Ah, not my pride as a gift giver, my pride as a husband," Xue Zhengyong corrects with a wink. "It may not seem like it, what with my attractive Xue genes, but Consort Wang is such a beauty, sometimes I wonder why she chose to marry me." A lovestruck expression casts over his face. "Seeing her walk around with something I gave her will make all the difference."

Chu Wanning supposes he gets it, and picks up the book he'd been reading. He just never would've assumed such thoughts ran through Xue Zhengyong's head, not with the way he and Wang Chuqing were so obviously infatuated with each other.

Xue Zhengyong seems to pick up on Chu Wanning's train of thought, and a booming laugh echoes through the hall. "My friend, love is a powerful thing, but there's no shame in wanting to see physical proof of it. When you feel so strongly about belonging to someone, sometimes you want everyone to know. A token of love does wonders for a doubtful heart."

It's been six months since Chu Wanning met Mo Ran, and much to his dismay, making him his aide didn't help much with the Ling-er situation. If anything, she's just become more of a thorn in his side. Now, Chu Wanning watches with a set jaw as she tries to tug Mo Ran away, who'd been in the middle of showcasing an assortment of pastries to Chu Wanning.

Alright then.

"Mo Ran," Chu Wanning interrupts, right before Ling-er can drag him away. "I need to speak to you about something important. Now."

Chu Wanning doesn't wait for an answer. He just spins on his heels and walks in the opposite direction, but keeps his ears peeled. It only takes a few seconds for him to hear a set of heavy footsteps following behind, and Chu Wanning, with a childish smugness, keeps walking until he's sure they're out of Ling-er's sight.

Chu Wanning eventually stops under the shade of a tree. When he turns to face Mo Ran, the other is staring at him quietly. "What is it?" he asks.

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

Well, this is an issue.

Chu Wanning didn't consider Mo Ran might actually follow up on this white lie of his. His mind had been focused solely on eliminating the problem, and now that he's done it, he expects this whole thing to drop. If Chu Wanning doesn't answer, though, there's a chance Mo Ran might run right back to Ling-er, and the thought puts a bitter taste in his mouth.

Chu Wanning clears his throat. "Your technique."

"My... technique?"

"With the spade."

Mo Ran blinks. "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

God, does he have to spell it out for him? Chu Wanning's fingers twitch at his side. "It's good. You're proficient at digging very deep holes." Then he pauses, and concludes with, "Keep up the good work."

There, that should do it. No one can turn away praise, and it's only logical for Chu Wanning to give Mo Ran feedback on the work he's been doing. That's exactly why Chu Wanning startles at the laugh that comes out of Mo Ran next, loud and amused. It makes Chu Wanning bristle. "What's so funny?"

"You pulled me aside so you could tell me I know how to use a spade well?"

Mo Ran didn't have to say it like *that*. Chu Wanning feels the tips of his ears light a fiery red. "You ungrateful — ! Fine, see if I ever compliment you again!"

"Wait, wait," Mo Ran pleads, laughter bubbling to a stop as he reaches for Chu Wanning, who's ready to bolt. "I don't mean it in a bad way, really. Thank you."

It takes a minute for the irritation in Chu Wanning's head to dissolve, but eventually it does. Mo Ran picks up on his lightened mood right away, because then he's leaning forward and asking, "This talent of mine. Could I impress someone with it?"

Oh.

"...There's someone you have your eyes on," Chu Wanning says casually.

"Mm... there might be."

An unsettling wave of disappointment courses through Chu Wanning. He clears his throat and looks at the ground as he plays with the hem of his sleeves. "I see."

Mo Ran is silent for a long minute. It's only when Chu Wanning looks back up in confusion that he sees a large grin spread across Mo Ran's face. "Chu Wanning, what do you think I should do?"

Chu Wanning frowns. "About what?"

"About the person I have my eyes on. How do I show them I care?"

How would I know? Chu Wanning wants to say, but then he focuses on the radiance in Mo Ran's eyes, looking at him playfully, sincerely, and his next words tumble out of him before he can stop them. "...A gift."

"A gift?"

"Something unique, that only you two would share," Chu Wanning says, heat crawling up his body.

Then it feels like a bucket of cold water dumps on him, because Chu Wanning thinks of Mo Ran giving Ling-er a gift. He thinks of Mo Ran smiling at her, dimples and all, with his shirt halfway unbuttoned because he can't ever act decent for once in his life, holding out some—some *flower* or hair clip he thinks Ling-er would like.

The thought brings a sour taste to his mouth. How stupid. Mo Ran and Ling-er already have a connection of their own. They live in the same village, cook the same meals, know the same people. Is that not enough? Never mind the potential for Mo Ran to get distracted because of a new love life; did Chu Wanning really have to see Ling-er parading around with some physical proof of it?

Chu Wanning's mood takes a sharp dive. "Actually, never mind. That's stupid. Either tell them you like them or don't." He steps out from under the shade of the tree and makes his way back to the center of the village. "And don't ask me nonsense questions again."

Mo Ran bursts into laughter behind him. Chu Wanning has no idea why.

"I hear there's someone you've been spending quite a bit of time with in Yuliang," Xue Zhengyong brings up one day over a meal.

"Oh, that Mo Ran guy?" Xue Meng asks, the name coming out of his mouth like it's something offensive. "Shizun, what's up with him? He never leaves you alone."

"He's my aide. He's not supposed to," Chu Wanning explains, and hopes his answer will put an end to all this. To his dismay, it only makes things worse.

Xue Zhengyong perks up. "An aide? You?"

"It's an unfamiliar village. Of course I'd need one."

"Er... but you've been going there for months now."

Chu Wanning bites the inside of his cheek. "There's no point in taking away the title," Chu Wanning says in what he hopes is a tone of dismissal. "It means nothing, anyway."

"Of course," Xue Zhengyong laughs. "Of course."

"Chu Wanning? What are you doing here?"

"Where else would I be but here?" Chu Wanning mutters, trying to act indifferent, but he knows Mo Ran's not wrong in asking. He's come to Yuliang alone and a day earlier than usual, after all, for reasons he'd rather not think too deeply about.

He stares down at Mo Ran, who sits on the ground behind his home, and wrinkles his nose, moving his robes around to try and find a proper way he can sit down.

Mo Ran laughs and reaches for him. "Let me help you."

"No need," says Chu Wanning, smacking Mo Ran's hand away. "I can seat myself."

And then, to prove himself, Chu Wanning plops down right where he's standing. He hums, satisfied, but a scowl is quick to curl at his lips when he sees a toothy grin spread across Mo Ran's. "What's with that face?"

"Imperial Chancellor Chu must like me if he's willing to sit on the ground with me."

"Quiet," Chu Wanning murmurs, ears red. "Who likes you? Don't make stuff up."

Mo Ran laughs. "Am I? There are probably other villages that could use your help, but you keep coming here."

Brat, you've gotten bold, Chu Wanning thinks with a grumble. "I only come here because it's warmer than the other villages. I don't do well in the cold."

"Oh?" The speed at which Mo Ran stands after he says that spooks Chu Wanning. "Stay here," is all Mo Ran tells him before sprinting away, leaving Chu Wanning to stare after him in confusion.

When Mo Ran returns, he's holding something behind his back, and there's an unfamiliar red pendant swinging from his neck.

Mo Ran kneels down in front of Chu Wanning. "I'm glad I picked this up yesterday, since you came earlier than usual," he says, then brings his hand out in front of him and uncurls his fist. There's a necklace in his hand, a copy of the one around Mo Ran's neck. Chu Wanning doesn't say anything when he sees it, not sure why it's being held towards him. "It's a dragonblood crystal. It keeps you warm."

Chu Wanning's heard of it before, so he knows Mo Ran isn't making things up, but he still doesn't understand why Mo Ran's showing it to him.

It's not until Mo Ran unhooks the chain, holding its ends between his fingers as he looks at Chu Wanning expectantly, that Chu Wanning's mouth runs dry. "Why..."

"For the cold," Mo Ran repeats, and the words make Chu Wanning burn.

It doesn't make sense. There's no reason for Mo Ran to have gotten it for him. He'd never mentioned his dislike of the cold before today, never having had a reason to with Yuliang's scorching temperatures. "Then why do you have one?"

"Mm." Mo Ran leans forward to clip the necklace into place around Chu Wanning's neck, and a smile tugs at his lips. "I wonder."

Chu Wanning doesn't call Mo Ran out for his vagueness, regardless of how often it annoys him. He instead stares at the pendant laying against Mo Ran's chest, bright and red, beautiful and unique. Then he looks down at his own chest and sees the same shade of red, shaped into the same crystal, and a lump forms in his throat.

His stomach fills with butterflies that churn so much it's painful as the new weight settles around his neck. Regardless of Mo Ran's inten-

tion in giving him this pendant, it fills him with something that makes him feel light.

Then Mo Ran leans forward and takes one of Chu Wanning's hands in his own, lacing their fingers together in a way he's never done before. Chu Wanning doesn't pull back, too frozen to move. "Mm, I think it's working," Mo Ran muses. "Your hands are warmer than usual."

Mo Ran eventually leads him back to his carriage as the day draws to a close, and when Chu Wanning steps inside and the pendant swings from his neck, he finds himself staring down at it again. It almost hypnotizes him.

"So," Mo Ran drawls, and Chu Wanning snaps his head up, eyes blinking from the glowing red around his neck to Mo Ran's teasing eyes, "now that you have that, I guess I won't be seeing you much anymore?"

The two of them stare at each other in silence. Chu Wanning purses his lips and narrows his eyes, doing his best to throw a wave of pure intimidation in Mo Ran's direction.

Mo Ran's smile only grows.

A searing heat crawls up Chu Wanning's neck. The tips of his ears color red. He does his best to act indifferent, unaffected, but the way Mo Ran can so easily ruin all his attempts at it infuriates him.

"You know," Mo Ran says, cutting into the silence, "the warmer you are, the brighter the crystal glows."

Chu Wanning takes a second to process what Mo Ran says, then his expression turns scandalized as he claps a hand over the crystal. "Mo Ran!" he scolds, but all that accomplishes is sending the other into a fit of laughter. "Mo Weiyu!"

The laughter only grows.

Chu Wanning fumes. "Stop making things up, yours is also glowing!"

"Of course it is," Mo Ran says with a grin. "I held your hand, Chu Wanning."

Chu Wanning flushes, then immediately swipes the curtain closed.

"Get home safe," he hears from outside.

And when Chu Wanning takes off, the carriage pulling him further and further away from the village of Yuliang, he misses the *Wanning*

from behind that's much too soft to do anything but dissipate in the wind.

Three weeks later, eight months since Chu Wanning met Mo Ran, Xue Zhengyong announces that he's arranged a banquet to be held for the purpose of finding Chu Wanning someone to marry.

"No arguments. It's something I've been needing you to do for a while now. But while we're at it, let's find someone that makes you happy, my friend," Xue Zhengyong says with a bellowing laugh. He then leaves Chu Wanning alone with his thoughts in the middle of the hall, with a pendant that burns hot around his neck as a dimpled smile flashes through his mind.

He squashes the image before it can get clearer.

Chu Wanning is in a bit of a daze the next time his carriage pulls into Yuliang. With no Xue Meng today to distract him from his thoughts, the prince staying behind because of a cold, he only snaps back to reality at the familiar sound of warm laughter.

"Chu Wanning! You came back for me?"

Mo Ran runs towards him, and the sight douses Chu Wanning's heart in the first wave of calm he's felt all week. "Ridiculous," he mutters half-heartedly. "Who's coming back for you?"

Chu Wanning doesn't miss the way Mo Ran's eyes flicker to the dragonblood crystal around his neck, or the way dimples carve into his cheeks afterwards. "You're right, you're right. My mistake."

They head over to a grassy field they've recently been spending much of their time in, Chu Wanning's trips to Yuliang becoming more leisurely than productive. Mo Ran starts with his usual recounting of everything exciting that's happened in the past week, and Chu Wanning does his best to keep up, letting out small *mhms* when necessary. Then Chu Wanning notices Mo Ran trail off, slowly, until he's gone completely silent and the only sound around them is from the children in the distance.

"Chu Wanning," Mo Ran eventually calls.

Chu Wanning doesn't look at him. "Hm?"

"Something's wrong," he says, not a question.

Chu Wanning debates asking Mo Ran to drop it, but he knows there's no point. Eventually Mo Ran will know, given how widespread happenings at the capital are. There shouldn't be a reason why Chu Wanning can't tell him himself. "There's going to be a banquet."

Mo Ran smiles. Any other time, the sight would send Chu Wanning's stomach into a frenzy of somersaults. Now, it makes it harder to breathe. "That doesn't sound like something you'd be interested in."

Chu Wanning lets the words sink heavily into the air around them. "It's meant for my engagement."

Mo Ran's face drops. "Engagement? To who?"

Chu Wanning glances at Mo Ran, only to find an expression on his face that lacks any of its usual radiance, that looks completely *unnatural* on him. "I don't know. The point of it is to find someone to marry."

Silence again, so deafeningly loud that it makes Chu Wanning's ears ring. Mo Ran's lips twitch around unspoken words. Finally, he says in a cracked whisper, "Who's forcing you to do this?"

"No one."

"Someone is. You don't want this."

"And how would you know what I want?"

"I can tell you're upset just by looking at you."

Chu Wanning sets his jaw. "I'm not upset. Who said I'm upset?" The words come out harsher than he intends them to, his mood spiraling so quickly it makes him dizzy.

"Chu Wanning," Mo Ran says, and it's with a tone he's never heard directed towards him, one plagued with mocking disbelief. "You're many things, but a good liar isn't one of them. I asked you what was wrong. *You* brought up the banquet. Just tell me who arranged it and I'll—"

"And you'll what?" Chu Wanning scoffs and averts his eyes, fingers curling into a fist that trembles in his lap. "Stop it?"

Mo Ran frowns. "I could—"

"No, you can't. Forget it," Chu Wanning spits, and stands up. "I was just making conversation when I told you about the banquet. Don't stick your nose in places it doesn't belong."

Chu Wanning makes to leave, the world swaying a little before him, but it doesn't take long for a hand around his wrist to pull him back. When he spins, he meets red-rimmed eyes.

"Wait."

"Get away."

"Not until you talk to me."

"Get *away*."

"Why won't you —?"

"Mo Ran!"

"Wanning!"

At the outburst, Chu Wanning feels like the temperature around him plummets several degrees. Whatever fighting words Chu Wanning was gearing up to say stop cold in his throat as he stares at Mo Ran, the other's eyes darkening so quickly they leave him frozen.

"You're just going to get married?" Mo Ran asks, the sudden drop in his tone sending a shiver up Chu Wanning's spine. A threatening haze Chu Wanning has never seen on the other clouds his eyes. "To someone you don't even *know*?"

Chu Wanning takes shaky steps backwards as Mo Ran steps forward, only stopping when his back collides with the wall of the house they were sitting behind. Mo Ran leans close, until all of Chu Wanning's senses are filled with him. "You're not even going to fight it?" Mo Ran's eyes flicker to the necklace around Chu Wanning's neck. "You're just going to let another man touch you while you wear that? You..."

That catches Chu Wanning off-guard. He doesn't stop to think about what Mo Ran could mean. Instead, his eyes flash red with rage. "What do you mean, let another man touch me? Who's touching me *now*? You're ridiculous, acting like I'm offering myself up to whoever will take me when this is about my duty, about—"

"You're kidding," Mo Ran cuts off, the laughter that escapes him completely devoid of humor. There's an insanity in his gaze that makes a shiver crawl up Chu Wanning's spine. "Duty? That's your excuse?"

Chu Wanning clenches his jaw and remains silent.

Mo Ran tilts his head, eyes suddenly emotionless. "Chu Wanning. You're serious."

Chu Wanning forces down the uneasy feeling in his stomach. “I don’t have to explain myself to you,” he quips, the words like sandpaper in his throat. He pushes Mo Ran’s hand away. It falls easily and swings at his side. “I don’t belong to you.”

Mo Ran goes impossibly still before him. It feels like the world does, really, and Chu Wanning only knows it hasn’t because of the pendant against Mo Ran’s chest, swaying lightly with the wind. At the sight of it, the chain around Chu Wanning’s own neck gets heavier and heavier, until it presses hot into his skin and his knees feel like they’re about to buckle.

Weeks of wearing this necklace, and it had only ever made Chu Wanning feel secure. Needed. Wanted. Now, he feels it’s about to strangle him. He almost wishes it would.

“No,” Mo Ran finally says, voice cold. “I guess you don’t.”

Chu Wanning sees a torrent of emotions flash through Mo Ran’s eyes. Anger, disappointment, confusion, and something else that Chu Wanning can’t put a name to, but it compounds every flash and makes it stronger. Then Chu Wanning sees something else, obvious and blaring *hurt*, and a voice in the back of his mind tells him to reach out. To speak up.

In the end, he doesn’t.

“Then, this one wishes you a safe trip home,” Mo Ran says, voice dripping with sarcasm as he turns and walks away, “Imperial Chancellor Chu.”

Chu Wanning does not return.

He reasons with himself it’s because Yuliang doesn’t need his help right now, not that they really have for the last few months. He reasons with himself it’s because Xue Meng has learned everything he can from Yuliang, and now needs to catch up on all the reading he’s been neglecting because of his trips there. He reasons with himself, because if he doesn’t, then he’s accepted the fact that maybe it wasn’t some responsibility tying him there all along.

Time passes, and as the banquet draws nearer, Xue Zhengyong seems set on making this as grand of an event as possible. Chu Wanning isn’t

a fan of any of his ideas, shooting down all attempts at making the banquet unique and extravagant.

Until one day, a trade puts in their possession a collection of eye masks of all colors and designs. Xue Zhengyong entertains the idea of throwing some sort of masked banquet — “Ha, maybe that’ll hide the flush on my face when I have a little too much to drink!” — and to his surprise, Chu Wanning agrees.

Chu Wanning’s eyes trace over the variety of masks in front of him. He leans forward and grabs a plain white one.

First impressions are everything, and with masks, it’ll be easier.

With masks, his first impression can’t be: *They’re not Mo Ran.*

All too soon, the day of the banquet arrives. Chu Wanning is given a set of new robes to wear, but he leaves them folded on his bed and slips into his usual attire instead. He’s given a headpiece much grander than what he usually dons, but leaves that aside, too. The only accessories Chu Wanning decides to wear are the white mask he’d gotten days before, and one he’s never taken off: a dragonblood crystal that sways from his neck.

For the last few weeks, it hasn’t glowed.

When Chu Wanning steps out into the main hall and takes a seat beside Xue Zhengyong, he’s instantly met with a barrage of people trying to win his favor. They all follow the same routine: telling him their name, their family, their education. Some are even bold enough to try and dance with him, but Chu Wanning is quick to shoot that down every time. Just the thought of someone being that intimate with him makes him uneasy.

Then he feels the phantom touch of an arm around his waist, of a hand in his own, and he has to shrug it away.

Eventually, all the artificial conversations and attempts at humble bragging wear down on Chu Wanning, and his irritation reaches heights it never has before. It’s after the eighteenth man approaches him that he finds he no longer has the energy to care about any of this.

“Imperial Chancellor Chu,” the newcomer greets.

“No thank you,” Chu Wanning says, and downs an entire drink.

Chu Wanning gets up after that with plans to retire to his room. He'll have to find someone to relay the message to Xue Zhengyong that he's leaving, that he can pick someone out for him — have them duel in the middle of the hall for all he cares — and end this miserable banquet for all of them. He'll apologize later, but it's truly a wonder he's even made it this far, his mask that hides the agony on his face the only reason everyone hasn't already been scared off.

As he sneaks his way to the hall's exit, he hears it.

Wanning.

A whisper of his name floats in the air behind him, and Chu Wanning's blood runs cold. He must be hearing things, must be imagining the way his name was just said so delicately, so warmly, with a voice that's echoed through Chu Wanning's mind for the last week, keeping him awake at night.

His fingers twitch at his sides, and a flicker of desperate hope causes him to turn around before he can convince himself not to. "Mo — ?"

"I give my greetings to the Imperial Chancellor."

The name dies in Chu Wanning's throat as his gaze falls upon the man behind him. He wears a long, black robe that hugs his tall frame. On the man's face is a mask as dark as his clothing, with jewels of purple lining it.

Chu Wanning thinks, sadly, that it looks extremely expensive.

Much too expensive to belong to a man from Yuliang.

Chu Wanning does his best to squander the disappointment flaring up inside him. It's his own fault for clinging onto some stupid fantasy. "Do you need something?"

The man laughs, and it sounds so achingly familiar Chu Wanning feels his heart squeeze in his chest. "Everyone's had a turn with you. Do I not get one, too?"

A frown tugs at Chu Wanning's lips. It looks like his plan of escaping into the night is hopeless. "Which family are you from?" he asks, the words rehearsed and monotone like they've been all night. He readies himself for the onslaught of humble bragging.

"Mm... not any you would've heard of."

Chu Wanning's brows pinch together. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't come from a well-known family."

"Then..." Chu Wanning pauses. "Then what do you — ?"

The man steps closer and holds out his hand. "I may not have as much to give you as everyone else, but I was hoping I could still ask for a dance."

Chu Wanning eyes the man suspiciously. He has no desire to mingle with him, but he won't deny that he's curious.

"I won't dance with you," Chu Wanning says after a long while. "But we can talk."

There's something strange about this man.

When Chu Wanning asks for his name, he doesn't give it. When Chu Wanning leads them to a courtyard behind the palace to get away from the crowds, he doesn't take advantage of the fact he now has his undivided attention. When Chu Wanning cranes his head to look at the stars above them, waiting for the man to speak, he instead lets the silence stretch between the both of them.

It's a little torturous, being surrounded by quiet that allows his thoughts to run free. As he recalls the night and all the men who'd approached him, the faint pang in his chest he's done his best to ignore becomes more noticeable.

Dozens of people vying for his attention, and Chu Wanning only ever wished to hear one name come out of their mouths.

It's now been ten minutes, and the man beside Chu Wanning has yet to say anything. Chu Wanning casts him a side glance, finding the behavior odd. At this point, whatever charade he's been trying to pull should be long over. Right now, Chu Wanning should be shooting him down and making his way to his bedroom for a much-needed night of sleep.

Instead the man stares at the sky with a faraway glance, his eyes shimmering with an emotion Chu Wanning has become all too familiar with in the last few months.

He sees it between Xue Zhengyong and Wang Chuqing.

He sees it between the couple who'd recently wedded at Yuliang.

He sees it in himself, sometimes, when...

Ah.

So that's how it is, then.

"You're not here for me."

The man beside him blinks from his thoughts. "Excuse me?"

"You're not saying anything."

"Oh." He laughs. "I was watching how you interacted with everyone else. You looked irritated, so I thought I'd steal you away to give you a chance to breathe."

Chu Wanning highly doubts that, but nothing the man's done so far suggests he's lying. Chu Wanning purses his lips together. "Answer my question."

"You didn't ask me a question."

"What are you here for? You obviously didn't come looking to compete for my hand in marriage."

"I didn't?"

"No. It feels like..." Chu Wanning trails off.

A curious hum sounds from beside him. "Like what?"

"Like there's someone you're already in love with."

Silence blankets them once more. The man puffs out a laugh, and it's all the confirmation Chu Wanning needs.

"So I'm right."

"What if I told you," the stranger says, turning to fully face Chu Wanning, "that it feels like you're the same?"

Chu Wanning doesn't entertain that with a response. "If we're done here, I'll be leaving."

"So there is someone."

"It doesn't concern you."

"Are they here?"

Chu Wanning clenches his teeth together, his mood reaching a low it hadn't all night. It really takes someone special to make Chu Wanning wish he was back in the banquet hall, dealing with ignorant and scheming men rather than whatever the hell was going on *here*. As his temper flares, a heat he hasn't felt in weeks scorches his chest and compounds the already rising temperature of his body.

In the night, a red glow lights the air around them.

"Dragonblood crystal? Who's that from?"

"No one," Chu Wanning hisses. "Goodbye."

The man actually has the nerve to grab his wrist, keeping him put.

"No one? Or no one important?"

"Obviously they're important if I'm wearing it," Chu Wanning snaps, not even able to tolerate the accusation that Mo Ran isn't someone special to him. "Now let go of me."

"Do they — ?"

"What's wrong with you!" Chu Wanning yells, his already stretched-thin control bursting. "Asking me this and that! Taking up my time for no good reason! If you're here to criticize me for my decisions, then I can assure you I've heard it all before, from a man much better than you, and— Why are you laughing?!"

The man holding his hand laces their fingers together, which slot with perfect ease. The action infuriates Chu Wanning, and he has half a mind to break the man's fingers, consequences be damned, before he hears him speak up again. "Even when you're yelling at me, holding your hand makes me feel warm."

Of course it is. I held your hand, Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning feels the breath punch out of him, his red-rimmed eyes widening. He stares at the black mask in front of him, at the way it encompasses eyes suddenly filled with warmth, hope, and joy, and then he notices a dull red glow from beneath the man's black robes.

Chu Wanning's voice is hoarse when he speaks next. "Mo Ran?"

There's no reply, but Chu Wanning doesn't need it. He reaches up with a shaky hand to remove the stranger's mask. The man quickly grabs his wrist, stopping him, and leans down to press their lips together.

It's strange, the fact Chu Wanning and Mo Ran have never kissed before, but Chu Wanning can say without a shadow of doubt Mo Ran is who he's kissing now. Careful, probing touches that morph into desperate, possessive ones. Hands that wander down to his waist and hold him close, with a security he's felt many times before. It's all reflective of who he is.

Everything about the way Chu Wanning's body reacts tells him that this is Mo Ran, too, from the instant static that fills his mind to the soothing warmth that surrounds his being, making him feel weightless and alive.

They kiss, though it's more of a fumbling effort on Chu Wanning's end, and it's a culmination of months of repressed feelings poured into an instant.

"Marry me," Mo Ran says.

Chu Wanning feels the press of those words into his lips more than he hears them. His fingers twitch in Mo Ran's hold, bottom lip quivering as he stares into magnetic, dark eyes. "Mo Ran—"

"Wanning, marry me."

Chu Wanning hadn't replied, too overwhelmed to say anything, but there must have been something in his eyes that was answer enough for Mo Ran, because a few minutes later, they're panting heavily into each other's mouths.

"Baobei, *fuck*," Mo Ran groans, pressing Chu Wanning into a pillar at the edge of the courtyard as he paws at the ties to his robe. "How do I get you out of this?"

The words force a whimper out of Chu Wanning, warmth embarrassingly pooling in his gut from the feeling of Mo Ran's lips on his neck alone. "M-Mo Ran. Not here," he pleads, placing a shaky hand on his shoulder. "We need to go back, or—"

Mo Ran knocks Chu Wanning's mask off his face. Then there's the sound of fabric tearing, followed by the sensation of cool, evening air tickling the bare skin of his legs, and it makes Chu Wanning's knees buckle.

"Chu Wanning," Mo Ran says, voice deep in a way that commands attention. "Wanning," he then says, softer, and loops a finger through the pendant around Chu Wanning's neck. "You're mine." Then, with a hint of desperation, "Say I'm yours."

Chu Wanning's mind spins. "I'm yours," he whispers. "Mo Ran—"

"It was driving me crazy, seeing everyone walk up to you like they even had a *chance*," Mo Ran grunts, mouthing along the cut of Chu

Wanning's jaw. "Every single one of them. I kept thinking they might be the person to take you away from me."

"Mo Ran—"

"And you might've let them. Wanning," Mo Ran breathes into his mouth, voice rough. "You're a cruel man."

Somehow, with the help of Chu Wanning's dazed mind recalling the layout of the capital, they make it to Chu Wanning's bedroom. Mo Ran turns on the light and Chu Wanning finds himself breathless as it illuminates Mo Ran's maskless face, something he'd only been able to dream of for the last few weeks.

Now it's in front of him again, kissing him, wanting him.

Mo Ran pulls Chu Wanning into another kiss, this one much gentler, much slower. Any other time, Chu Wanning is sure he would appreciate it. Now, there's a franticness shooting through him, and he's desperate to calm it down. With a slight tremble in his hands, Chu Wanning places them on Mo Ran's chest, then slides them down to the ties of his robe.

Mo Ran gets the hint. He frees Chu Wanning from whatever fabric is still on his body and takes his own robes off. As they fall back onto the bed, Chu Wanning is overwhelmed by Mo Ran: Mo Ran's hands on his waist, his sides, carding through his hair and tugging so Chu Wanning's head falls back and bares his neck. Mo Ran's lips are on his jaw, his throat, sucking marks into his collarbone and tonguing at his chest.

Mo Ran's body is flush against his, skin to skin, and it makes Chu Wanning feel like he's being consumed whole. Then Chu Wanning feels Mo Ran wrap a hand around the both of them, moving it in time to the sweet nothings and desperate groans whispered into his ears, and tears spring in Chu Wanning's eyes as he claws at the wide expanse of Mo Ran's back. He hurtles towards a pleasure he's never felt before. It's not long before Mo Ran groans into the skin of his shoulder as Chu Wanning whines into the air around them, and together, they fall over the edge.

Chu Wanning, once he's recovered from bliss, realizes he doesn't know how Mo Ran even got to the capital in the first place.

"You think I just laid in bed feeling sorry for my poor heart?" Mo Ran grins. "Wanning, you think too little of me. I was halfway here by foot when the darling prince's carriage passed by. He said King Xue had specifically requested my presence. Speaking of, I'll have to, uh, apologize to him later."

Chu Wanning, currently held flush against Mo Ran's side, frowns into the skin of Mo Ran's upper arm. "What did you do?"

Mo Ran pouts. Chu Wanning narrows his eyes. "Wanning, what was I supposed to do? He came up to me and started talking about your big banquet. I was already angry and started yelling at him about it, and I, uh, may have grabbed him by the collar, but I didn't hurt him, and I think we even bonded a little bit on the ride over here..."

Chu Wanning's brow twitches. "Are you crazy? You almost fought your own prince? Do you know how much trouble you could've — !"

Mo Ran doesn't know, and he seems to not care, either, not by the way he captures Chu Wanning in another kiss and bites his already-swollen lips to an even fiercer shade of red.

"I'd do it again," Mo Ran promises, pouring his entire heart into the connection between their lips. "I'd do anything for you, Wanning."

Chu Wanning shakes faintly as he looks up at Mo Ran, at his naked body hovering over him, filled with a heart he'd bared to him with honesty and trust. The press of Mo Ran's skin against his reminds him that he's much the same, laying everything out in its entirety in front of the man he cherishes, with no cover to hide behind. The only thing on either of their bodies right now are the dragonblood crystals, Mo Ran's pooling right over where Chu Wanning's rests against his chest.

"I'll marry you," Chu Wanning suddenly says, quietly. It might be silly of him to say it now, his feelings definitely clear if the last hour is anything to go by. Still, he owes it to Mo Ran to tell him directly. He owes it to himself, too. "Mo Ran, I want to be yours."

Mo Ran freezes for only a split second before he breaks into the widest grin. "Wanning," he breathes, capturing his lips once more. "Wanning, I love you."

The words set off a fire in Chu Wanning's chest, one that spreads and burns until there's not an inch of him that doesn't feel their effect. He

wants to gift Mo Ran those same words but feels too overwhelmed to do it now, still caught up in the fact Mo Ran is here with him.

So Chu Wanning kisses him back in reply, and hopes Mo Ran can feel it. The dragonblood crystal around his neck glows a blinding red.

Belonging to You

BY MAR

There's something about Chu Wanning's very being that makes Mo Ran's instincts yearn to run wild, like untamed beasts. It's so easy to be overwhelmed by Chu Wanning's existence, and by the fact he is permitted to witness it. Somehow, each day dawns and he is still Chu Wanning's husband; he still gets to touch and look at Chu Wanning as much as he wants.

Mo Ran wakes each morning with Chu Wanning pressed against his side, overcome by his beloved's warmth and the softness of his bare skin. Every fibre of his being wishes to kiss Chu Wanning awake, to demand his attention, because as much as he loves to admire his Shizun's beauty as he sleeps, he loves his company most.

When they bathe together, Mo Ran finds himself intoxicated by rivulets of water running down an elegant, pale back. The urge to pounce, to discover how springwater tastes when it is clinging to his Shizun's skin, thrums insistently in his veins as he waits for Chu Wanning to finish washing himself. When he finishes rinsing the suds from his hair, Mo Ran won't hesitate to crowd him close, kiss him breathless until he is pliant and soft in Mo Ran's arms. Sometimes, he cannot even stand to wait that long, opting instead to pull the fragrance bar from

his Shizun's fingers, determined to wash Chu Wanning himself despite his half-hearted protests.

Chu Wanning looks longingly at a plate of pastries, and Mo Ran yearns to feed him by hand, to cradle him close and let his fingers linger on Chu Wanning's lips as he delivers each bite.

Cherish, touch, kiss, devour — Mo Ran's body wants to move on its own accord when he is anywhere near Chu Wanning.

When they're alone, he doesn't have to resist. If he doesn't kiss Chu Wanning awake, it is because he wishes for him to sleep a little longer, not because he is not permitted.

Chu Wanning welcomes his touch now. Mo Ran doesn't miss the way Chu Wanning's breath trembles when their hands meet unexpectedly, or how he leans into Mo Ran's embrace like it's the easiest thing in the world. It's hard to ignore the way Chu Wanning slumps against him slightly as if he completely trusts Mo Ran to support his weight.

In their little cottage hideaway, where they get to be alone and lost in each other, Mo Ran indulges his instincts. Chu Wanning is a feast, and Mo Ran eats heartily from the plate before him, pouring his love and adoration back into his beloved to keep him full and happy.

So, when they're not alone, and the instinct to *protect* and *defend* is rattling around in his core, he has a much harder time wrestling with the growling, snapping creature inside of him.

Often, Mo Ran will insist on going to the market alone; Chu Wanning enjoys relaxing in the afternoon sun with Goutou curled up in his lap, and Mo Ran wants to give him as many opportunities to enjoy himself as possible. No need for his Wanning to lug sacks of rice up the mountain when Mo Ran can very well do it himself. Chu Wanning's protests at Mo Ran's enthusiasm for behaving like a pack mule have lessened over time, thanks to Mo Ran's unwavering persistence.

Today, he hated the thought of leaving Chu Wanning behind, and asked for his company.

Now, he finds himself wishing he hadn't.

It isn't because he regrets asking for Chu Wanning's company; no, that certainly isn't the case. Travelling down Nanping Mountain together was as pleasant as it always was. It had been nice to get out in the

clear, fresh air with the sun high overhead, filtering through the trees as he and Chu Wanning made their way down, alternating between talking idly and enjoying the sound of the wind fluttering through the leaves overhead.

Mo Ran is also pleased that the market ends up being less crowded than usual, something he knows Chu Wanning likely appreciates. If Chu Wanning is happy, Mo Ran is happy.

No, the reason Mo Ran suddenly wishes Chu Wanning was at home, curled up with that annoying little dog, is the unwelcome commentary that reaches them from where they are poring over a stall with a selection of teas.

"I don't see why Mo-zongshi keeps such unpleasant company," the first shop girl says, in a whisper so loud Mo Ran doesn't understand why she's even bothering keeping up the pretense. "He's so friendly and well-liked, but I see him all the time with that sour-faced man. Someone as handsome as him should have a more friendly companion."

"Are you volunteering yourself?" the other girl comments, her voice no quieter. This earns her a giggle in response, which she blusters past. "Ah, Chu-zongshi isn't so bad, but he should smile more, it'll make him seem more agreeable. Mo-zongshi won't want his company for long if he's so unpleasant all the time."

The careless words strike Mo Ran deep in his gut.

With a sinking heart, Mo Ran's eyes dart to Chu Wanning; the glimmer of hope he'd been holding in his heart that Chu Wanning didn't hear their words is instantly dashed to pieces when he sees his Shizun's tight expression.

Though not unfamiliar with rage by any means, he doesn't feel it often these days. His memories are tender and raw, the biting shadows of them ache, but the jagged edges have been dulled a little. The passing of time has softened him enough that he can turn those memories around in his hands, prod them where it stings. In the years he spent travelling around as Mo-zongshi, he'd grown accustomed to sitting with that uncomfortable hurt, the past weighing on his heart and burning in his veins with every painful step.

Now, his days are filled with sunshine and Chu Wanning's soft, unassuming smile. He has everything he's ever wanted; why should he be angry?

This, how he feels now, is dull in comparison but not unlike the vestiges of rage he carried with him from his past life.

Instinct dictates that he defend his beloved, strike back just as hard as they struck what belongs to him, but he knows Chu Wanning wouldn't want that. He internally grimaces at the thought of his Shizun's face if he were to do such a thing, and decides instantly not to risk anything. It would only hinder his mission of making his Wanning smile again.

Mo Ran watches the curve of Chu Wanning's mouth turn downwards, so slightly one wouldn't notice if they weren't paying close attention. He sees the way Chu Wanning's eyes flick with irritability towards the pair, the way his mouth tightens defensively before his eyes fall, downcast. It is a sight Mo Ran never likes to see, but it is an expression on the face of the man he loves, so he welcomes it nonetheless. He knows the turn of Chu Wanning's mouth better than he knows his own, and he wishes to step forward and whisk his Shizun away, smooth that frown away with his own mouth, draw pretty noises out of him instead.

Mo Ran's heart rattles painfully against his ribcage. He knows what his Shizun would say: that it's foolish, really, to get so worked up about something like two shop girls gossiping loudly, but even so, Mo Ran bristles. Who are they to upset his beloved on a pleasant outing together?

As tempting as it is to give into the urge to charge forward with defense and praise of his Shizun, to scold them for daring to assume such things about him and his tender heart, he swallows the urge and buries it. There are other ways to protect Chu Wanning, after all.

Like, by tending to that tender little heart with everything he has.

Determined to salvage the rest of the outing, Mo Ran pays quickly for the selection of tea they picked out before they were so rudely interrupted, and points away from the stall. "Shizun, look! That stall over there has osmanthus cakes, I'll buy you some."

He only catches a glimpse of the frown his words prompt because he darts forward and grabs Chu Wanning's hand, dragging him along before he can even think to protest.

Though Chu Wanning still seems rather tense, it becomes apparent quickly that the tried and true method of feeding Chu Wanning to soften his temper still holds up. Chu Wanning still looks pinched and sad, but Mo Ran also noticed the way his eyes grew brighter at the sight of the snack, and it was impossible to miss the small flicker of excitement on Chu Wanning's face when he handed the treats over.

They continue on, Mo Ran wrapping a hand around Chu Wanning's and tugging him along gently. Distracted by his cakes, Chu Wanning follows quietly.

They have a few more supplies Mo Ran would like to gather before they make their way back up the mountain, but instead he ends up scanning each stall they walk past eagerly.

When the right one catches his eye, he knows it in an instant.

He turns to Chu Wanning, who is licking sugary residue off his fingers and startles when Mo Ran's attention is suddenly on him again, as if he'd been caught.

"Shizun, could you go get a sack of rice? I saw someone selling fresh fruit earlier, and I'd like to get some for you to have with our meal tonight, but it looks like it's going to rain. If we split up we'll get back sooner."

Chu Wanning's lips press into a thin line. Mo Ran falters a little as he realizes he hasn't exactly created the best alibi to slip away. He can see the thoughts forming in his Shizun's mind: a simple barrier would take care of the rain, and they passed a merchant selling umbrellas earlier. There should be no reason to hurry home in fear of getting wet.

Mercifully, Chu Wanning does not comment on this.

"I will," he agrees through tight lips, the reply coming with a slight nod after a short pause. "We'll meet back here."

They won't be parted for long, but even so, Mo Ran aches with the need to kiss Chu Wanning properly, seal his lips shut with a promise of belonging before sending him off.

Even though it might earn him the full brunt of Chu-zongshi's rage — it's something he knows his rakish, feral counterpart has gotten in trouble for on his days with Chu Wanning — for a moment he considers going for it. Unfortunately, Chu Wanning is too fast; before Mo Ran gets a chance to capture him in an embrace, he's already turned on his heel and begins striding quickly through the crowd.

He is unable to resist watching Chu Wanning as he glides effortlessly through the throngs of market goers, easily sidestepping a group of children, each playing with a painted bamboo dragonfly in one hand. A moment later, Mo Ran sees Chu Wanning quickly avoid being struck by a stack of mats slipping off a merchant's cart without getting his hem muddled in a nearby puddle. He pauses to help the merchant reload his cart, awkwardly bowing at the man's profuse thanks, before continuing on his way.

His Shizun is so kind and beautiful; like the lovesick fool he is, Mo Ran loses himself in that thought for long enough that he slips away from himself, flitting off to a dreamland where he and Chu Wanning are already at home together, in bed. It's a shame to leave their cottage ever, really, when he could have Chu Wanning naked and writhing on their sheets instead.

When he startles himself out of the reverie, it is with the realization that he is on a time sensitive mission. He nearly knocks over a very kind looking woman over in his haste to correct his course.

Mo Ran offers a quick but genuine apology for the blunder, which is accepted easily, leaving him to set off once again. He makes way towards his prize: a stall run by a sweet, round-bellied man with thinning hair and a cheerful smile, which boasts a wide array of *intimate* items.

He greets the merchant politely as he approaches, complimenting the quality of his wares, which is met with genuine gratitude. Spurred on by Mo Ran's kind words and friendly smile, the merchant happily tells Mo Ran about the items he has for sale. Quite the impressive selection, Mo Ran thinks, noting the various types of restraints he has available alongside a vast array of jade toys in a shape that would have Chu Wanning sputtering and hissing if Mo Ran had taken him along.

Lamenting that he needs to hurry if he wants to surprise Chu Wanning, he bypasses the phallic toys with a little bit of scorn; he'll make sure Wanning is satisfied with his own equipment, thank you. Who needs a stick of jade to pleasure their man when they already have one between their own legs?

Instead, he makes a beeline for the rack of finely-made collars of silk and leather.

He knows what they are meant to be used for; he's seen this kind of play before in his youth. It hadn't appealed to him too much back then, but everything with Chu Wanning is more exciting.

Mo Ran glances over in the direction Chu Wanning disappeared, eyes surveying the crowd to make sure a familiar figure in white isn't making his way back to Mo Ran's side. Despite knowing that this mission depends on secrecy, his chest swells with the desire for exactly what he cannot have.

Once, he might have thought it was strange — to be so attuned to someone's presence that he feels it like a physical ache — but now it just seems more strange for Chu Wanning to be out of his sight. The familiar beast within him is snarling and snapping at his prolonged absence, but he tamps it down with all the fortitude he can muster.

This is for Shizun, after all. He has to stay strong!

He ends up choosing an understated matching pair of collars with plans already forming in his mind, both of them very finely made, the bronze buckles shining on their bands of leather. One of them has a thicker band with a heavier buckle, while the other is more dainty, a petite version of its counterpart.

The thought of it wrapped around Chu Wanning's neck, sitting pretty on the column of his pale, elegant throat, a symbol of his belonging to Mo Ran...

He cuts that thought off right there. He's still standing in a crowded marketplace, and if he keeps thinking about Chu Wanning in such a vulnerable, compromising position, he's going to have trouble hiding his excitement before they escape the curious eyes of onlookers.

After he's paid for the items, he catches sight of one he'd missed, tucked further just a little out of sight. This one is more delicately

made; the band is silk, much less sturdy than the options he ended up going with. The fabric is dyed a soft, pretty pink, and a small bell hangs from it.

The thought of Chu Wanning in this particular collar has him even *more* inappropriately distracted, and he indulges in the image for a few moments before shaking the thought away. Even when he's nowhere in sight, Chu Wanning holds his attention.

He'll ruin the surprise if he doesn't hurry, though, so he cannot linger here to daydream about Chu Wanning when the man himself would be returning to find him any moment.

Because he is not in the business of denying himself an indulgence for Chu Wanning, Mo Ran buys all three collars, which pleases the merchant greatly. He happily wraps them and places them in a box small enough for Mo Ran to tuck into his robes.

Pleased with the spoils of his detour and having thanked the merchant with a promise to return, Mo Ran hurries back to the spot where he said he would meet Chu Wanning.

Since the crowds aren't too thick today, it's easy enough to spot Chu Wanning once he starts making his way back to Mo Ran.

"Shizun!" Mo Ran beams, waving his hand to get Chu Wanning's attention. He looks up at the sound of Mo Ran's voice, eyes darting around the throngs of market goers until he finally lands on Mo Ran's face.

While familiarity had softened the intensity of meeting his Shizun's eyes across a crowd, it has not become any less overwhelming. He feels Chu Wanning's presence across the gulf of space between them.

It's so easy to step forward, to meet in the middle.

"Shizun," Mo Ran says, grinning unabashedly as they approach each other. "They were out of fruit, so I came back to look for you as fast as I could! I missed Shizun's face."

Chu Wanning lets out a sharp exhale through his nose as Mo Ran reaches out to take the sack of rice from him and heft it over his shoulder. "We were barely apart, don't be ridiculous."

Laughing, Mo Ran follows behind him, happily tailing in his footsteps when he sets off. "But I'm ridiculous, Shizun! Do you love me anyways?"

Abruptly, Chu Wanning stops in his tracks in front of him, causing Mo Ran to nearly crash into him.

"Shizun? What's wrong?" Mo Ran asks as he adjusts the sacks he's carrying, lest they topple over into the dirt.

Chu Wanning turns, as abruptly as he'd stopped, his brow pinched in the familiar expression he gets when he's feeling especially stubborn or determined.

One step would close the gap between them. Chu Wanning takes it fearlessly, before reaching out to grab Mo Ran's free hand.

"I do," he says simply, gaze shaky but unrelenting.

Before Mo Ran can properly respond, Chu Wanning is on his way again, quick and slippery in his movements like a cat, but still bound to Mo Ran by their linked fingers.

Mo Ran smiles as he follows Chu Wanning faithfully, wondering if Chu Wanning likes to escape so much because it's so fun when Mo Ran finally catches him.

It's strange to think that once he agonized over what Chu Wanning might be thinking, the motivations of his Shizun so easily twisted and mangled in his mind. One might think Chu Wanning is complicated and difficult to please, but Mo Ran has had the supreme privilege of learning that the fussy, temperamental creature who hissed and swatted at anyone who came too close, was actually quite *easy* to please.

Despite the unpleasant encounter with the shopgirls earlier in the day, the evening passes pleasantly once they return to the cottage. Mo Ran spends the rest of the afternoon cooking a large spread for the two of them to share; mandarin fish with pine nuts in a sweet and sour sauce, stewed crab meatballs, steamed buns, and a few bowls of rice cooked to the perfect tenderness.

Warmth fills Mo Ran's chest when he calls Chu Wanning over to eat. He eyes the food Mo Ran lays out with interest, and his eyes linger on a plate of lotus crisps Mo Ran snapped up earlier at the market. Not quite

as good as the ones from Lin'an, but still delicious and sweet enough to entice his Shizun.

When Mo Ran chuckles and asks if Chu Wanning would like the pastries first, Chu Wanning huffs at him with displeasure at being caught, lips pursing into what Mo Ran could only call a pout.

"Don't be silly," Chu Wanning replies curtly, shaking out his sleeves. "I am not a child begging for sweets before a meal." Mo Ran tactfully bites the inside of his cheek, smothering a laugh and the urge to tease. Best to save teasing for when Chu Wanning gets all tender and loose-lipped — if he comments now about how Chu Wanning could have fooled him, he's going to have a harder time getting him soft and honest tonight.

Now, Chu Wanning dutifully picks at the fish and rice dishes first, only looking longingly at the plate of pastries a few times throughout the meal. It becomes exceedingly difficult to not simply nudge the dish closer with each stolen glance, but Mo Ran manages to hold out for a little while. Plying Chu Wanning with food is an art form, after all; he can't be too hasty in a task that requires finesse.

Instead, Mo Ran pours him a cup of pear blossom white wine, which he accepts politely without any other comment. A small victory in Mo Ran's favor; when Chu Wanning had complained last that Mo Ran shouldn't treat him to his favourite things so often, because special occasions were more than enough, Mo Ran had leaned in and kissed him in a line up his neck. He lingered there as he told Chu Wanning that every day was special with him.

Chu Wanning was so flustered by Mo Ran's honesty the tips of his ears turned crimson as he sputtered and pushed Mo Ran away. The topic was dropped instantly, never to be brought up since. Mo Ran is pleased to see it has stayed that way.

The wine pairs nicely with the food. Chu Wanning contentedly sips from his cup until it's empty, only for Mo Ran to pour him another from the jar. He waits until Chu Wanning has eaten his fill to offer the pastries again, which Chu Wanning accepts this time. He nibbles the treat delicately while Mo Ran shamelessly watches him, utterly

endeared, leaning his elbow on the table with his face supported by his hand.

An evening sitting with Shizun, laughing and talking, is the only way he wants to finish his days. He could never get tired of this. Hours pass in a blink, the sun long since dipped behind the horizon, leaving Mo Ran to light candles between them. The soft firelight casts a glow over his beloved's face, softening sharp lines into warm, rounded edges.

The changes are slight, almost invisible to the naked eye, but Mo Ran is an expert in deciphering Chu Wanning's mannerisms at this point. He is happy to see as the hours pass, Chu Wanning's shoulders loosen slightly and his mouth curls more easily as he relaxes.

When Mo Ran finally, *finally*, reaches out to curl a hand around Chu Wanning's thin wrist, he comes easily, willingly allowing Mo Ran to guide him into his lap without protest. He makes a soft huffing sound as he settles into place, as if the last vestige of stress from the day melted and escaped him at Mo Ran's touch.

The thought alone warms Mo Ran through and through.

"I have a gift for Shizun," Mo Ran says, rubbing a hand over the back of Chu Wanning's neck, enjoying the softness of the skin beneath his fingertips.

At the announcement, Mo Ran feels Chu Wanning perk up in his lap a little bit, shifting on his perch. "Mo Ran didn't have to do that," he admonishes.

Mo Ran responds to this by placing a noisy kiss onto Chu Wanning's exposed neck, eliciting a shiver from him. "You would deny your husband the joy of showering you with gifts?" Another kiss. "Surely Shizun isn't so cruel?"

"Are you just going to tell me about it or are you going to show me?" Chu Wanning snaps. He squirms in Mo Ran's grip, his expression beautifully wronged.

Laughing, Mo Ran delivers one more kiss, and the way Chu Wanning's flush deepens is more than worth getting glared at. Chu Wanning can look at him like that all he likes; he just likes when Chu Wanning looks at him.

"Forgive me, Shizun, you're simply too fun to tease."

"Shameless," Chu Wanning mumbles, but the reprimand comes without heat.

"Yes, yes." A final kiss before he draws away, and then Mo Ran reaches down to where he's stashed the collars in his robes, and places them in Chu Wanning's lap.

"..."

"Does Shizun know what to use these for?" Mo Ran asks, amused by Chu Wanning's lack of response; he simply stares into his lap with his brows drawn together in confusion.

"..."

"Or, should I just show you? I'll give you a hint, first," Mo Ran smirks, undeterred by the wary glance Chu Wanning throws in his direction.

He leans in close, a hand curling around the back of Chu Wanning's head as he draws their foreheads together. A moment passes in which Mo Ran allows himself to breathe him in, feel the thrum of anticipation building between them.

"Tonight, I'd like it if Shizun was only wearing this."

Chu Wanning's life these days seems to involve spending a lot of time in Mo Ran's arms.

Not that he's complaining; it can just be rather surprising at times. One moment, he's perched happily in Mo Ran's lap, accosted with the prospect of his own nakedness so suddenly that he spits out an affirmative between trembling lips. In the next moment, he's being swung into the air with a small squawk of surprise.

Mo Ran had loosened his robes earlier in the evening, letting them fall open just enough to reveal a delicious sliver of a broad, honey-colored chest. It had been very distracting, and now it is even more so from the cradle of Mo Ran's (strong, muscular, warm) arms as he is carried off to the bed, face hidden in Mo Ran's neck.

Mo Ran sets Chu Wanning down, urging him with a gentle touch to lean back against the pillows as he squirms and averts his eyes.

"Shizun," Mo Ran rumbles, the sound resonating like thunder in the air around him, piercing through the hazy fog clouding his mind. His voice is warm and familiar, and Chu Wanning melts into it without

even realizing. "Shizun, why won't you look at me? Am I so hard to look at?"

Chu Wanning's face burns hotter, indignation moving his lips before he can even think. "No!" he exclaims, nails biting little crescent moons into his palms as he glances up to meet Mo Ran's eyes. He shouldn't let Mo Ran think things like that just because he's still a coward about his own feelings. "Mo Ran is... very handsome."

There's a long pause following his words, the space between them thrumming and charged. Chu Wanning shifts nervously as the tension in the room spikes.

"Wanning," Mo Ran says, lower this time, the sound running over his skin like warm bathwater. He doesn't need to look, he can hear the smugness just under the surface just fine. "You think this husband is handsome?"

Chu Wanning purses his lips, brow furrowing. "Mo Ran should know." He does, doesn't he? Chu Wanning has said so, right? Surely he isn't still so terrible at marriage he cannot even make his absurdly handsome husband feel good about himself?

A hand on his thigh, warm and heavy over the thin fabric of his inner robes, stops his thoughts in their tracks.

"I know," Mo Ran chuckles, and then his lips meet the curve of Chu Wanning's jaw, sending fire licking up his spine. "But I like to hear it from you, Shizun, won't you tell me again?"

Chu Wanning sighs; ah, so that's how it is. Realizing what Mo Ran is doing, Chu Wanning tries with all his might to quell the frantic beating of his heart. Blushing would only give Mo Ran the satisfaction of embarrassing him, yet again. Even if he doesn't delight in it as loudly as his more boisterous counterpart, Chu Wanning sees the way Mo Ran's eyes light up when he squirms.

"Mo Ran is very handsome," he says.

The man in question practically vibrates with glee. "Shizun is the one who is handsome, so beautiful and elegant, but I like to hear you say so."

Chu Wanning's mouth flicks up into a soft smile. "Mm," he hums, softened by Mo Ran's exuberance. Even if the words Mo Ran are saying

aren't true, Chu Wanning knows Mo Ran's honesty when he sees it, and he knows his husband believes what he is saying.

"Will Shizun let this handsome husband undress him?"

Chu Wanning huffs. He's really going to go on like that! "Do as you like!"

Mo Ran chuckles softly. "What I like is whatever you like, baobei."

Chu Wanning turns away from those tender words, unable to bear them alongside Mo Ran's gentle gaze as well. He feels like he might melt and become one with the bed if Mo Ran keeps this up.

Thankfully, Mo Ran doesn't prod anymore. Instead, he begins to undress Chu Wanning with gentle, capable hands. He works quickly enough Chu Wanning only feels moderately impatient for the feeling of Mo Ran's hot, firm body pressed against the length of his own, but slow enough that he can satiate Chu Wanning's cravings just a bit with gentle caresses and lingering touches as he rids him of his robes.

Once Chu Wanning is completely bare, Mo Ran doesn't waste any time rising to undress himself, much quicker than he'd undressed Chu Wanning. He watches Mo Ran reveal himself, arousal already stirring in his core.

"This part is the surprise," Mo Ran informs Chu Wanning as he crawls onto the bed, moving over top of Chu Wanning where he is leaning back on his elbows. "Close your eyes?"

Not quite understanding why he needs to close his eyes, Chu Wanning does it anyways, thoughtlessly obeying Mo Ran's soft command. That simple exchange alone is enough to send a shiver up his spine; between their nakedness and Mo Ran's firm yet gentle voice, Chu Wanning can already feel himself slipping towards that floaty place he visits when Mo Ran fucks all the thoughts out of his mind.

Then, he's startled right out of it again, when Mo Ran gently strokes the side of his neck before starting to fasten the band.

At the realization, Chu Wanning's breath sticks in his throat, his heart doing a valiant thump against his ribcage before skipping a beat entirely.

"Mo Ran?" His hands fly up, fingertips bumping blindly into Mo Ran's forearms before they're captured in stronger, larger hands and

squeezed. The collar Mo Ran had begun to fasten around Chu Wanning's neck falls onto the bed next to his bare arm with a faint clatter of metal.

He'd... he'd thought... maybe his wrists, but around his neck...

"Baobei, open your eyes," Mo Ran murmurs, voice heavy and commanding beneath the softness of his preferred pet name for Chu Wanning. He strokes his thumbs over the backs of Chu Wanning's hands in a gentle, reassuring motion. "Would you like to stop?"

Chu Wanning's chest tightens uncomfortably as his eyes flutter open. "No!" No, he doesn't want that. He'd just been surprised.

Mo Ran rumbles a pleased hum at that, the sound resonating deep in his chest. Chu Wanning shudders at the sound, something helpless and small quaking inside of him at the throaty noise. "Do you trust me?"

Swallowing dryly, Chu Wanning searches the planes of Mo Ran's face; for what, he doesn't know, and so it's hardly surprising he finds Mo Ran's eyes and gets lost in the soft adoration that lays there.

He may be apprehensive, but he cannot stand the idea of Mo Ran's hands leaving him for a moment.

"Good," Mo Ran says. He follows the praise with a series of noisy kisses to the backs of Chu Wanning's hands.

Chu Wanning feels the bed dip beneath him as his hands are released, an indication Mo Ran has leaned closer to him.

This is confirmed a moment later, when he feels Mo Ran's warmth against him and a small peck is placed behind his ear. "Then keep still, kitten. Close your eyes again." He nips at Chu Wanning's jaw, the brief flash of teeth against Chu Wanning's heated flesh jarring, but not unwelcome. "Behave and I promise I will take very good care of you."

At the new, unexpected pet name, Chu Wanning makes a rather undignified sound that is not unlike a startled fowl, which only deepens the flush on his cheeks. Kitten... why would Mo Ran call him that? Where did that come from? And why is it making Chu Wanning's blood burn hotter, his pulse quicken in his veins?

He does as he's told, though. This time, Chu Wanning does not interrupt as Mo Ran fastens the band around his neck, murmuring the whole time about how good it looks on him, how well Chu Wanning

sits still for him. Chu Wanning can feel his breath quickening, his body's heat increasing. The pressure around his neck is very faint; not tight enough to cause any discomfort, but also not loose enough that he can forget about its presence.

It's strange — not in a bad way, it's just... new. Mo Ran has a tendency to overwhelm him in the best way with his ministrations and undivided attention. This is no exception. The entire universe has shrunk significantly, all of Chu Wanning's attention hyper-focused on the sensations of his body, and Mo Ran's presence.

If this could be his entire world always, he doesn't think he would have a single reason to complain.

He opens his eyes again when he is told to do so, and finds Mo Ran is grinning, his eyes shining bright with self-satisfaction.

"Do you like it?" he asks, infuriatingly. As if he doesn't know. As if he doesn't know better than Chu Wanning himself.

Chu Wanning glares silently until Mo Ran chuckles, swooping in to capture his lips in a kiss before he can make a retort.

"Don't be angry, Shizun," Mo Ran murmurs against his mouth, kissing him a few more times before pulling away just slightly. "It just makes me happy when you feel good."

A flush creeps over Chu Wanning's cheeks as he squirms. His irritation had been half-hearted at best, and he definitely can't hold onto it when Mo Ran speaks to him like that: low and warm, voice gravelly with desire. The intoxicating promise of being wanted is too tantalizing to ignore.

"Will Shizun help me with mine, too?" Mo Ran asks. He's holding the larger collar — it's a *collar*, apparently, and Chu Wanning can't decide if he feels more stupid for not picking up on that right away or for not understanding what they're doing with them now — up to his neck, pulling it taut so Chu Wanning can fasten it for him.

Chu Wanning nods. He feels a little unsteady right now, and the prospect of a simple task he can do with his hands is especially appealing at this particular moment; the coolness of the bronze clasp is a welcome reminder of reality, pulling him back to the planet's orbit, back to his home with Mo Ran.

He's... nervous. Whenever either Mo Ran suggests they try new things, it always ends in new and fascinating ways to make Chu Wanning wail and come so hard he sees stars.

It's not that he doesn't enjoy it. It's just... so much sometimes.

It's hard to believe he gets to have this.

"Shizun?"

"Yes?"

Breath hot in Chu Wanning's ear, Mo Ran only utters one low sound: "Woof."

"?!?"

Chu Wanning's mind stutters, gears turning in his mind as things click into place. The collar is...

Ah.

Well.

"This is!"

"Mm? Does Shizun understand now?"

Chu Wanning gapes at him. This is something people play with in the bedroom?

"I'll be your loyal dog," Mo Ran explains carefully. "Your protector. No one can ever hurt you or take you away from me, because I'm yours."

"Mo Ran doesn't need to protect me," Chu Wanning insists, but it's half-hearted. His eyes are fixed on the collar in his hands.

"Shizun can take care of himself," Mo Ran agrees without hesitation, "but he shouldn't have to."

Frowning, Chu Wanning speaks again. "I'm not going to pretend to be a dog," he says, instead of asking, "*won't you get tired of me?*"

This startles a laugh out of Mo Ran, deep and full of mirth.

"No, Shizun isn't like a dog, is he?" Mo Ran ponders. "More like a little cat."

Chu Wanning's mouth falls open, working helplessly around unsaid words before it snaps shut again.

Smirking good-naturedly at Chu Wanning's flicker of interest, Mo Ran leans in a little, so his breath fans over Chu Wanning's reddened cheek. "Well? Would Wanning like to be my kitten?"

Chu Wanning's heart thuds painfully, a confusing heat rising in his belly.

"Look," Mo Ran breathes, his smile soft and gentle where it falls on Chu Wanning as he reaches out to touch the collar, "we match, Shizun."

Chu Wanning can't help the fractured sound that comes out of him. It feels like it had always existed inside of him, waiting to erupt at the right moment.

He can't see himself, but he is ever aware of the presence of the collar around his neck; it's foreign, not something he would have predicted would feel natural to wear, but it does. Its presence is so palpable Chu Wanning feels it running all the way down his spine to the tips of his toes.

"Thank you," he says, because words aren't big enough for this right now, and that's all he has.

Having the life kissed out of him seems like an okay way to go, and Mo Ran seems to be getting right to work testing that out. His lips are hot and insistent against Chu Wanning's mouth in an instant, stealing his breath right from his lungs.

"Wanning, do you like it?" Mo Ran asks. As if connected to Chu Wanning by some kind of invisible, unbreakable force, he doesn't lift his mouth from Chu Wanning's skin to speak, mumbling the words into the space between each kiss instead.

"I..." Chu Wanning doesn't quite know how to feel. He feels... warm. His skin is alight with heat, each touch charged, sparking like the inside of a tree that's been struck by lightning.

He feels small in Mo Ran's arms, pressed into the bed by his large, familiar frame, his body hot and hard against Chu Wanning's.

Underneath it all, Chu Wanning is constantly aware of the presence of the collar. It's just a small amount of pressure, the slightest reminder of its existence. And yet, it demands to be noticed. He is hyper-aware of each time it brushes across his skin, sending tiny sparks of light dancing across his flesh.

A pause, and Mo Ran nips at his neck. "Can't you feel how much your pup belongs to you?"

The way those words stick to him and burrow under his skin, it feels like they're being embedded in his soul. His breath trembles as it escapes him. "I..." he says, the word escaping him on a shaky exhale before trailing off.

Mo Ran's smile is breathtaking as he watches Chu Wanning struggle to find words. "Well, I'll just have to show you, baobei."

The press of fingers inside of him is no longer a surprise. Instead, his entrance flutters open around two of Mo Ran's thick, capable fingers easily, welcoming him inside. He's still soft down there, his insides worked open from a thorough fucking just that morning.

He likes how easy it is for Mo Ran to push inside, likes to know he's open and ready to take his husband inside at any time. It's a shameful, pathetic desire, but he thinks Mo Ran sliding inside must be what belonging feels like, as if he was made to be filled by Mo Ran.

Two fingers quickly become three. Chu Wanning can't help the choked off, wanton sound that erupts out of him at the transition. Mo Ran grins that infuriatingly handsome smile of his, and that makes the heat curling in Chu Wanning's gut burn even hotter. Mo Ran is so beautiful, giving Chu Wanning his undivided attention while wearing that collar. Why does his chest feel so full at the sight?

The matching garment around his own neck burns, heat and light licking down to his bones with a thrill every time it moves against his skin, reminding him of its presence.

On his back like this, Chu Wanning feels exposed and vulnerable, laid open for Mo Ran like a helpless little creature on the verge of capture.

"Hold here, Shizun," Mo Ran says, grabbing both of his hands in a pair that is so much larger and broader than his own. Gently, he maneuvers Chu Wanning's hands to the backs of his thighs, directing him with a firm touch until Chu Wanning is holding his own legs open.

The humiliating position brings color to his cheeks and quickens his heartbeat. He opens his mouth to protest, to tell Mo Ran that he must look ridiculous, but all that comes out is a ragged, breathy sound.

“Stay here for me, Shizun?” Mo Ran asks. He has released Chu Wanning’s hands at this point, and is now rubbing his thighs gently with those warm, giant hands.

Chu Wanning feels himself weakening at the touch and the earnestness in Mo Ran’s eyes.

“I like to see you like this,” Mo Ran admits, a sheepish little smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. He looks down at Chu Wanning hungrily, and suddenly Chu Wanning finds himself wishing he was a feast for Mo Ran to devour.

Luckily, Mo Ran doesn’t seem too opposed to the idea himself. Open-mouthed, breathy kisses are suddenly pressed in a column up Chu Wanning’s neck. Teeth flash against the sensitive flesh there, making Chu Wanning’s back arch as he lets out a gasp.

“I couldn’t resist,” Mo Ran mumbles into the curve of Chu Wanning’s neck. “You looked so delicious I just had to taste you.”

“Nn,” Chu Wanning replies, unable to protest or ask for more, simply reduced to making soft little sounds of pleasure and allowing Mo Ran to explore his body in that maddening, wonderful way of his.

Even so, Mo Ran seems to know what he wants innately. He’s ready for more. He *wants* more.

His eyes flit to the heavy length between Mo Ran’s legs, and though he would be humiliated to be caught sneaking a longing peak at Mo Ran’s groin, in his sex-crazed state of mind, he wouldn’t mind getting caught if it got him filled faster.

Mo Ran knows. He slides his hands up Chu Wanning’s thighs in an unbearably tender gesture, finger tips trailing over his skin with all the pressure of a butterfly’s wings. It’s sweet, but it doesn’t stay sweet for long; once he gets a handful of Chu Wanning’s thighs, he presses his hips forward, holding Chu Wanning’s thighs in a vise grip as the head of his cock brushes against Chu Wanning’s hole.

The groan that comes out of Mo Ran makes Chu Wanning’s toes curl with want against the bed, his back arching in a shameless manner as his body instinctively begs for Mo Ran to fill him.

Infuriatingly, Mo Ran just keeps holding onto him, slick cock pressed against his hole as he gazes down at him with lust-drunk eyes.

“Mo Ran!” Chu Wanning hisses. “If you’re going to do it, hurry up!”

Then, because Mo Ran is a cruel, unrelenting husband, apparently, he pulls away, his cock sliding against the sensitive flesh of Chu Wanning’s thighs as he falls back on his knees.

“Oh, kitten, that wasn’t very nice, was it? Where are your manners?” he croons, one hand creeping down so he can rub a large, firm hand over the swell of one of Chu Wanning’s cheeks. His hips move minutely, infuriatingly, so only the head of his cock repeatedly slips past the slick opening. “Your body is so lewd, and yet you still deny how much you want this. Won’t you ask for it nicely, Shizun?”

Chu Wanning’s face burns. “Why are you— Just continue!”

A dark, amused chuckle erupts from above him. “Why? Don’t force yourself on my account, baobei.”

Ah—

Teetering on the tantalizing edge of the heady warmth that always falls over him when they play like this, it’s suddenly too much to bear. Those words prod at a tender, private place inside of him that has endured more than enough today. In this weakened state, he doesn’t quite have the power to stop the wave of emotions that swell in his chest at those words.

“Maybe Mo Ran is the one who is forcing himself,” Chu Wanning snaps, sitting up a little and shuffling out of range. He watches as Mo Ran’s eyes widen, and feels guilt rising in him, but it can’t seem to overcome the panic those words bring. *He could find better company.*

Just because it’s true, doesn’t mean he enjoys confronting it.

Mo Ran’s mouth opens at the outburst, and he blinks slowly at Chu Wanning with confusion written on his face. “Shizun? Why are you upset, did I—”

“I... I want Mo Ran,” Chu Wanning blurts out. His eyes are downcast, but after he gets the words out he looks up again, lips pressed into a thin line. “Very much.”

Mo Ran cocks his head slightly to one side, so endearingly like an inquisitive puppy Chu Wanning’s heart squeezes with affection. No wonder he and Goutou don’t get along; they’re far too similar.

"I want you too, Shizun," Mo Ran says, no hesitation or doubt in his voice. It makes Chu Wanning's heart ache, makes him want to crawl inside this man's ribcage and curl up there, safe and warm. He is greedy and selfish — he wants Mo Ran to look at him and only him like that, to speak only to him with that tenderness.

Chu Wanning grits his teeth. Mo Ran gives him so much... he deserves to know how good he is to him, how good he makes him feel.

He wishes, not for the first time, that he were better at this.

"You said..." He trails off, grasping for words. "I'm not forcing myself. I want Mo Ran."

"Baobei..." Mo Ran's eyes shine before he leaps forward to gather him into a hug. "Shizun, I know, you make me feel so loved... I, uh. Maybe we're not ready for that kind of talk in bed."

Chu Wanning's brow creases into a slight frown, but he isn't quite sure why. That just doesn't sound quite like the conclusion he was hoping for.

"Or..." Mo Ran ponders, voice slow. He peers at Chu Wanning a little closer. "Maybe you liked the rest?"

Chu Wanning purses his lips. The comments from earlier flash in his mind; Mo Ran deserves to know how he feels. "I like everything with Mo Ran."

Mo Ran laughs. "Well, not everything," Mo Ran amends for him, "but don't worry, baobei, I'll remember the things you don't like for you."

He kisses Chu Wanning's cheek, as if sealing a promise.

"I have an idea."

With that, he leaps off the bed, and it lightens Chu Wanning's heart a little at how endearing he looks rushing off, the strong plane of his back and firm behind proudly on display as he strides across the room to shuffle through the items on a shelf. Chu Wanning watches with his heart thudding softly in his chest. Every part of Mo Ran is beautiful: his broad shoulders, his strong thighs, his large hands. Chu Wanning feels helpless, unable to look away.

When Mo Ran returns, it is triumphantly, with a length of thin rope in one hand.

He loops the length of rope through the buckle of his collar. He ties a knot, securing it in place.

"I didn't want to start with too much, so I was going to save this for later, but..." He pauses, lifting the length up pointedly. "Maybe Shizun would like to play with it now?"

Chu Wanning purses his lips, cheeks flushing as his eyes flick between Mo Ran's hand and his face. He isn't sure what Mo Ran is trying to suggest, but he knows well enough by now that it's probably going to be humiliating. "Play... how?"

Mo Ran's face lights up in a grin. Chu Wanning's heart swoops. Oh, he loves this man so dearly; it would consume him if Mo Ran wasn't there to anchor him himself.

Exuberant, Mo Ran scrambles back onto the bed, a perfunctory kiss dropped onto Chu Wanning's mouth before he settles on his knees in front of him. With his excited, open expression and the way he's perched, it's all too easy for Chu Wanning to imagine him with a fluffy tail wagging behind him.

A dearly beloved puppy, so loyal and fearsome and tenderhearted.

"It's for you to hold, Shizun," Mo Ran explains, placing the length in Chu Wanning's hand. "See? It'll be like we're connected. Shizun can tell me what he wants without using words."

Chu Wanning looks up at that and frowns.

"I can use words," he says, knowing he sounds a little moody, and that it's partially a lie. He'd been trying, he knows he's not very good at it yet, but he doesn't want Mo Ran to give up on him.

"Of course," Mo Ran agrees easily, blustering past Chu Wanning huffing with a kiss to his hand. "But Shizun deserves to not think. Let me do it for you."

Mo Ran, in all his puppy-like glory, truly has some kind of innate ability to ply Chu Wanning with his gentle words. He knows how to make him come willingly when he feels this is too much, he can't possibly deserve this much. Being loved by Mo Ran means those thoughts don't have time to take root. They have a harder time spreading their poisonous tendrils of doubt through his mind.

What once seemed natural is a contradiction of Mo Ran's love for him.

Those thoughts are still there, but with Mo Ran... maybe he's learning how to keep them at bay.

Feeling a little wobbly, Chu Wanning lifts a hand to press Mo Ran's cheek, who is smiling softly at him, waiting patiently for Chu Wanning's response.

A simple nod is all it takes.

Mo Ran's breath fans over his cheek, sending little pinpricks of warmth over the expanse of his flesh. "Keep still, I'll make sure it feels good, Shizun," he murmurs.

There's an instinct inside of Chu Wanning that demands he resist. It demands he lash out, reject the simple, sweet-as-honey command, because it's simply too intoxicating to give in. It's so good, it can't surely be for him.

But it is for him. The insistent, unrelenting pressure of Mo Ran's hand on his hip reminds him of that — the gentle press of his lips against his cheek, his lips, his forehead, all driving it home.

The feeling of Mo Ran finally sliding into him is such a relief a small sob escapes him at the fullness. This is what he wanted, this is what he craved... it's shameful how much he wants it. Mo Ran fucked him just this morning yet here he is, spreading himself open once again and loving every moment of it.

A few slow thrusts get Chu Wanning accustomed to the feeling of Mo Ran inside of him. They do not last; once Mo Ran's cock is sliding easily in and out of Chu Wanning, he grunts, and his rhythm picks up, fucking harder and faster at a measured pace. Maybe Chu Wanning is imagining it, but Mo Ran seems a little impatient, not drawing it out as long as he usually would.

Distantly, he hopes Mo Ran is also feeling especially desperate right now, matching the desire in his own chest.

"Mo Ran," Chu Wanning wails, breath leaving his mouth in rough, frantic pants. His voice is warbled by the force of Mo Ran pounding into him. "It's too much, too much—"

"Oh?" Mo Ran gives him a particularly bone-rattling thrust, keeping the pace steady as he rocks into him even harder, his hips obscenely slapping against Chu Wanning's behind as he fucks him. Chu Wanning shudders and clutches Mo Ran's shoulders tighter, eyes squeezed shut as he presses his face into the curve of Mo Ran's neck. "Then why are you moving so whoreishly on my cock, baobei? You're giving me mixed signals."

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he registers the humiliation embedded in those words, and, to his great shame, he arches his back and pushes harder against Mo Ran's cock, desperation driving his shame away as he mindlessly begs for more with his body.

Wild in his arousal, Mo Ran bites into the soft flesh of Chu Wanning's neck, drawing a soft whimper out of him at the contact. Chu Wanning feels Mo Ran's mouth lift into a smirk as he laves his tongue over the mark that surely blooms there, soothing the ache and sending shivers rippling through Chu Wanning's body.

"Wanning is so good to me," Mo Ran croons, pressing deep inside and gyrating his hips in a circular motion, causing Chu Wanning's toes to curl and his cock to twitch between his legs. "Shizun has always been so good to me, and now you beg so nicely for me to make you feel good too. Your body demands it, baobei. This—" Mo Ran pauses to deliver a slap to one cheek, surprising a wail from Chu Wanning as his cock leaks, "demands to be fucked."

"Mo Ran," Chu Wanning cries, the drawn-out syllables of his husband's name absorbed by his pillow as he finally gives in, pushing back against that thick length like the whore Mo Ran said he is. Maybe he's right; the way Chu Wanning finds himself arching his back into each thrust, his ass presented and open to be filled repeatedly as if... well, he can't think of an explanation that doesn't make him sound slutty, especially with his head in such a mess. Coherent thoughts are beyond Chu Wanning's grasp, currently.

The sound Chu Wanning makes at the sudden emptiness when Mo Ran stops and pulls out is pathetic and needy, but his body seems to be acting with a mind of its own, twisting with pleasure and heedless desire as his back arches.

He pushes back with a frown. Yes, he wants it. Why won't Mo Ran give it to him?

"Does my kitten want this?" Mo Ran punctuates the question by slapping the head of his cock wetly against Chu Wanning's hole a few times. The wet sound is lewd and obscene. Chu Wanning loves it.

"Wh—" The words stick in his throat and he swallows thickly. He gives up after just the one try, a pained sound coming out of him instead.

"Here, baobei," Mo Ran says. "You dropped this."

Through the haze of arousal clouding his senses, Chu Wanning registers that Mo Ran is pressing the length of rope back into his hands Ah.

He clings to it with both hands, using it as an anchor.

Finally, in a moment of weakness or bravery — he cannot decide which it is — he relents and tugs once, firmly but not too hard, on the leash in his hand.

There's a sickening, terrifying pause. Chu Wanning stays still, waiting with his heart in his chest, as the silence and stillness behind him grows deafening. Maybe Mo Ran changed his mind, maybe he—

A low growl swells like an oncoming storm behind him, startling his thoughts to a halt.

"Baobei wants my cock?" Mo Ran demands, his voice deep and gravelly with desire. "It's yours."

With no real warning, Mo Ran pushes inside in one long, fluid movement that leaves Chu Wanning panting and breathless.

A sound between a whimper and a moan tears from Chu Wanning's kiss-reddened lips.

"Mo Ran," Chu Wanning lets out a drawn out wail, dragged out of his soul by Mo Ran's relentless pounding into his hole.

"Look at you... baobei, you look so good under me," Mo Ran groans, his hands flexing on Chu Wanning's hips. "You're so perfect when you get what you want, you were made to be spoiled."

Chu Wanning doesn't have the strength to disagree, to do anything besides lay there and take everything Mo Ran gives him, soak it up into his bones and hold it there.

"*Mine*," Mo Ran moans, the words hot and breathless against Chu Wanning's neck.

Chu Wanning whimpers. Mo Ran's mouth is just over the collar, jostling it with every kiss, and each movement sends a jolt of belonging up Chu Wanning's spine. He is so full and surrounded by Mo Ran, he's all he can think about, he's all that *exists*.

His heart trembles in his chest as he clings to Mo Ran's shoulders, while his husband fucks him like it's what Chu Wanning is meant for. In this moment, it feels like belonging is something that can only be found inside each other.

The collar Mo Ran willingly put around his neck is a reminder; he is safe and loved, and he is home.

"Come for me, kitten," Mo Ran demands.

With a cry, Chu Wanning obeys.

Time feels inexplicably out of reach in the aftermath of his orgasm. Chu Wanning can't tell up from down, doesn't know how long has passed since he and Mo Ran came together, but it doesn't matter. Blissed out and content, he cannot bring himself to care about anything besides existing in this moment with Mo Ran.

Mo Ran presses lazy, gentle kisses all over Chu Wanning's face and neck as their breathing grows even again, and they bask in each other's presence. Their skin is sticky and damp; Chu Wanning would die before admitting it out loud, but he loves to be covered in evidence of Mo Ran like this. He'll also enjoy it when Mo Ran fetches a warm, damp cloth to wipe him down, and he'll enjoy it when Mo Ran crawls into bed next to him to hold him skin to skin, Chu Wanning feeling warm and clean and safe.

Maybe he just likes anything that has to do with Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning startles at the feeling of Mo Ran's fingers brushing against his neck, running along the edge of the collar. Confused, his eyes fly open again to peer at Mo Ran curiously. "Mo Ran, what— ah!"

A dagger of panic pierces his chest at the quiet jangling of bronze sliding against itself. Is Mo Ran... taking the collar off?"

"Let me take care of you, baobei, hold on," Mo Ran says, his voice spurring the panic even more. Why is he taking the collar away? What did he do wrong? Was he too greedy? Why is Mo Ran taking it away?

Suddenly, Mo Ran's hands fall away from his neck. "Wanning? What's wrong?"

It's only then Chu Wanning realizes his breath is shuddering out of him, each inhale more frantic than the last.

Enough of the fervent desire to please his husband remains that he does, with difficulty, turn his pathetic, damp face to Mo Ran, and tries to will his lower lip to stop trembling, to no avail.

Mercifully, Mo Ran assists, pressing a soft kiss to his lips and lingering there for a long moment.

"Baobei," he murmurs, pressing another kiss to Chu Wanning's lips before pulling away, his eyes concerned and confused. "Why are you crying? Did I hurt you? Tell me, how can I fix it? I have that ointment still—"

Chu Wanning shakes his head sharply, tears welling in his eyes once again. He feels so raw and vulnerable, so exposed. Mo Ran won't stop looking at him. "No, you didn't hurt me!"

Startled, Mo Ran's mouth snaps shut. Another wave of guilt rises in Chu Wanning's throat; he swallows thickly, the sensation choking him.

"Okay," Mo Ran says slowly, his voice patient and kind. "I believe you, Shizun. Won't you tell me what's wrong then? Please help this stupid husband understand."

Chu Wanning's brow furrows. "Mo Ran isn't stupid."

Mo Ran flashes him a grin that lights up his eyes, softness hovering in the curve of his mouth. "If Shizun says so, then it must be true," he proclaims, leaning in to bump his nose against Chu Wanning's cheek. "But still tell me? Please?"

A long pause follows before Chu Wanning has the nerve to speak again.

"I'm sorry I was bad," he manages this time, his voice still wobbling, but somehow he manages to say it.

Chu Wanning watches as Mo Ran's features fold into a confused frown. "Bad? Baobei, what... You were perfect! What are you talking

about?" His other hand flies up to cup Chu Wanning's cheek, holding his face steady in his large, strong hands. Chu Wanning has to stop himself from leaning into the comfort, seeking out their warmth like the greedy leech he is.

Shaking his head is the only response he can manage. Why is Mo Ran making him explain? Is this punishment too? If so, he should endure it.

Mo Ran gave him a gift, after all. He shouldn't act ungrateful.

Sex has made him incoherent, apparently, because this is not what he voices out loud when he finally speaks, his voice warbled and strained. "The collar... I want it on."

The exact moment of realization is visible on Mo Ran's face. His eyes widen slightly, his lips falling open for a moment before snapping shut again. He sits up a bit, awkward in his movements for a moment as he seems to frantically try to get closer to Chu Wanning.

"Baobei, you were so good for me," Mo Ran says, his voice sure and clear. His gaze is unwavering, holding Chu Wanning locked in its warmth, demanding his attention so insistently he knows that even if he wanted to look away, he wouldn't be able to. "You were so beautiful, you took it all so well. You made me feel so good."

Mercifully, Mo Ran does not comment on the strained, pathetic sound that twists in Chu Wanning's throat. His thumbs simply stroke his cheek, holding him close as he continues to speak in that low, soothing voice.

"You were perfect, I'm so lucky." He moves his hands to Chu Wanning's neck and leans in to press soft kisses onto his face, each brush of his lips gentle and reassuring. With each kiss, Chu Wanning feels the knot in his chest loosen just a little bit more. "You can keep it on as long as you like, baobei, it's yours. You don't have to earn what is already yours."

Relief floods Chu Wanning like a wave. He sags a little bit against Mo Ran, fingertips searching until they find Mo Ran's shoulders, curling his hands over their broad strength as he clings.

Mo Ran holds him like that for a while, with Chu Wanning's heart clattering in his chest the whole time as his thoughts meander through

his head with mild worries, until finally Mo Ran presses a kiss to the crest of Chu Wanning's brow.

"Shizun is fretting so loudly," Mo Ran murmurs against his temple, pressing another kiss there like a brand. "He should rest instead."

"I wasn't—" Chu Wanning's mouth snaps shut around the lie. There's no point; Mo Ran will only catch him in his own lie with a barrage of well aimed questions and gentle smiles. He decides it would be better to spare himself the embarrassment once again. "Mo Ran should rest, too."

"Mm," Mo Ran hums. He shifts until his face is buried in Chu Wanning's hair. Another kiss is laid there. "We'll both rest," he agrees. "I'll make you silk thread rolls with sweet potato filling in the morning."

Chu Wanning flushes. Mo Ran's innate ability to memorize his favourite things is seemingly boundless, extending even to sensing Chu Wanning's whims. He suddenly finds himself craving that particular dish the instant the words leave Mo Ran's lips. Or, maybe Mo Ran simply has the power to incite desire in him in every form with just a few words.

"No need to go to the trouble," he says with a sigh, knowing already it is a battle he will not win.

Mo Ran huffs, his breath warm as it ruffles Chu Wanning's hair minutely. "Not trouble," he mumbles sleepily. Sloppy, uncoordinated kisses follow. "It makes me happy to do things for Shizun. Let me lay with you for a moment, then I'll clean us both up."

Chu Wanning is glad it's dark and Mo Ran is on the verge of drifting off, because he's suffered enough embarrassment for one day, and his cheeks are flushing red. Silly, foolish disciple — so kind and gentle, giving all of his attention to his tired, old Shizun.

With another sigh, Chu Wanning cups the back of Mo Ran's head, cradling him with an unwavering hand. It cannot be helped; stubbornness and loyalty run so deep in Mo Ran's veins Chu Wanning believes their host would not be himself if he didn't have them. No matter which beloved version of Mo Ran he fell into bed with, this fact would always ring true.

He will have to accept Mo Ran as he is, just as he always has.

The Harbinger of Dawn

BY RIA

It starts because of an unanswered letter, and it ends with a promise made to reach through time. Today is an age of man, of technology, and while that doesn't mean the Gods no longer exist, humans have learned how to fight for themselves.

(...mostly. When there is a matter most inconvenient to them, they still wander to their temples and send a little prayer or two, go through the motions, perhaps offer the gods the finest wines they can offer, but that's it, really).

Long ago, humanity was in shambles after Hua Binan rendered the world barren with his demons, slaughtering all in their path.

When every pasture of green was left blackened, and rolling ashes were the only remaining whispers of the life that once was, mortals — tired and weary from the turmoil of war — turned to the heavens, palms upturned with desperate pleas as they begged the Gods for salvation.

Born from their cries were the Eight Immortals of Tian.

Eight harbingers of peace and prosperity. They fought Hua Binan, conquered his demons, and restored the balance of the world.

That time of glory has passed.

As the Harbinger of Knowledge, Chu Wanning is no longer needed in this world.

Time works differently for Gods. Everything is more... muted. Where time's progress is more pronounced for humans, for Gods, time is like a slow pond tucked away in a glen, unassuming and never drying. It's just... there. Chu Wanning never even noticed that his own abode, his own temple, was falling apart until a beam almost falls upon his head.

It is at that moment, as he looks at the rotten mahogany beam by his feet, that he realizes he too is crumbling with time.

His powers are not what they were once, and his energy is that of a mortal, just enough to get through the day. Though several human charities try to maintain his buildings to the best of their abilities, nobody seeks him to the same extent they did many years ago. They seek what they need to know through their little magic boxes called mobile phones and computers. Humans are self-sustaining now.

There is nothing left for him here.

The other Harbingers have found ways to retire, and one even gave up his immortality to be with the human he so loves.

Chu Wanning finds no reason to linger in the mortal realm.

He... he had a reason once, but that was a long time ago.

It has taken him seventy-six years in seclusion to reach this decision, and there is no turning back from this point onwards.

Climbing up on the roof of his temple, he reaches out one hand to his constellation and sends forth a message to the Heavenly Court, relaying his intentions of giving up his corporeal form. As soon as he withdraws his hand, a hefty weight settles over his skin, and there appears a small glass bottle in his palm. Unassuming, transparent liquid, yet a drop of it has the potency to kill ten thousand men.

For a God, however, a drop is enough to disintegrate his mortal form, so he may join the stars once more, ready for reincarnation into a mortal life. A normal life. One without burdens, he prays, and he hopes. He's certainly earned enough good karma despite his previous shortcomings.

Perhaps he'll find love too, one unburdened by duty.

Tomorrow, he'll take this after he finishes tearing down his temple.

Chu Wanning has never been one for the cold. He huffs as he stares at the blankets of snow covering his abode. It is indeed a good time to depart for the stars.

It's been a long time since he felt any semblance of warmth, he thinks as he tucks himself into his bed, pulling the threadbare quilt over his body with a quiet sigh. His feet poke through a hole that should have been mended over seventy years ago, but like his very existence, he wants to leave it untouched by time.

Chu Wanning wonders what *he's* doing right now. If he's heard about what Chu Wanning is going to do.

With that thought, he settles himself into a restless sleep.

knowledge

There's something oddly peaceful about destroying things.

The only way up to the temple is three thousand, three hundred and seventy-nine steps. Some trees fell on them overnight due to the strong winter winds that befell the slope yesterday, conveniently blocking the path up the mountain. It gives Chu Wanning plenty of time to tear down the compound. When he's done, he'll cause an avalanche, making it all look like an unfortunate accident. It's the perfect plan, he thinks with satisfaction as he unravels Tianwen from his wrist. A sort of high feeling comes to him as he strikes the first lash, bringing down the first wall of his compound in one stroke. Good riddance, he internally gloats. He never liked this wall in the first place. It was far too wonky, and it has bothered him for the past one thousand years, but he never got around (read: never found the energy) to actually fix it.

His high, however, abruptly drops to a low when his eyes catch some markings on the next wall he's about to tear down.

He lowers Tianwen and leans forward to brush his free hand over the etchings upon the stone.

A lone pawprint and the characters *goutou* etched beneath it; just above it lies a crude drawing of a cat and a dog.

His lips twitch, a fond, reminiscent feeling filling his chest as he remembers.

"We'll make this our home," was the promise made that day, the day they carved these things into the wall. "*We can finally be at peace here.*"

Warm hands, sun-kissed skin, and a dimpled smile... such memories are too bright to be remembered on such a bleak winter day. Chu Wanning exhales quietly and curls his fist above the stone. Perhaps he could carve this out and bury this somewhere for humans to find one day. He wonders what kind of assumptions they'll make about it. Something along the lines of "*two very good friends made this carving*". Heh.

He huffs and pulls away from the stone. He supposes he should do this wall last—

"What on earth do you think you're doing?"

Chu Wanning, startled, punches a hole through the wall, destroying the carvings in the process.

Oh no. He squeezes his eyes shut and tries to convince himself he's just hearing things. *No, no, no. Not now,* he chants in his head again and again like a mantra, willing the unwanted visitor behind him to be an illusion. He shakes his head and exhales a deep breath. *Of all times, why must you appear to me now?*

He feels a warm hand grasp his shoulder, a touch he's intimately familiar with even after all these years. "...Wanning?"

One hand becomes two hands, and he feels himself being turned around, the drag of his feet on the snow a sharp, unpleasant sound against his ears. No, no no—

Slowly, Chu Wanning's eyes open to stare wide-eyed at the man before him.

Mo Ran. The Harbinger of Dawn. The God of War.

The God he loved once.

(Still loves, whispers the depths of his heart pathetically.)

This is the first time they've seen each other in over seventy years. Chu Wanning feels a little pathetic at how his heart secretly beats with joy at the sight of Mo Ran.

It... it would be polite to say hello. He opens his mouth to say such, but he finds himself muted by his shock.

Even a simple nod of acknowledgment would do, but Chu Wanning's sensibilities have never been reliable when it comes to this man.

Mo Ran looks well and healthy. Unlike the pale complexion he had during the worst of wars, it seems that his skin has become a little tanned too, kissed by the sun. Modern clothing really does suit him, and he's kept his hair long, Chu Wanning notes with a small pang of fondness, eyeing the low ponytail that sits on Mo Ran's shoulder.

And if he were to lean in closer, the familiar scent of spring, of snowdrops would—

Nope. **No.**

The familiar scent of *no* would hit him. That's it, Chu Wanning thinks a little hysterically. He isn't real. He pulls from Mo Ran's grasp, and decides to ignore this apparition while he continues to tear his temple down stone by stone.

"You aren't real," he mutters. He raises Tianwen to strike at the next wall, only for a very real and firm hand wrapping itself around his wrist.

"Unhand me," he demands, his glare melting into a wary frown as his eyes catch the angry red glow of Jianguai tucked under the sleeve of Mo Ran's suit.

Mo Ran scoffs. "And let you destroy your temple? No thanks."

Chu Wanning is confused by his concern. Mo Ran looks... disappointed? Out of all the emotions he should be showing, like perhaps happiness, he should be happy Chu Wanning's leaving the mortal plane. Why else would he drop by without warning?

Chu Wanning scowls and wrenches his wrist from Mo Ran's grasp. How typical of them to already butt heads the moment they're in proximity to each other.

Mo Ran's annoyed expression shifts into a worried frown. "Wanning..."

Chu Wanning's face twists, turning his head away from Mo Ran's gaze. "What are you doing here?"

A pause, and then, "Can I not visit you?"

He gives an incredulous scoff at that. "After so long? Surely not without a purpose."

Mo Ran goes quiet at that. Too quiet. Chu Wanning isn't exactly great at conversation, so he lets the silence settle on them like a heavy

blanket, the two of them awkwardly standing amidst the debris of the temple.

Chu Wanning clears his throat. "You could help," he mutters, awkwardly gesturing to the broken walls around them.

Mo Ran gives him a flat look. "With your powers, you could level the whole compound with just one snap of Tianwen."

Chu Wanning gives a little *tch* and steps in front of him. "Just because I can doesn't mean I want to."

"Sentimental?"

We'll make this our home.

Chu Wanning doesn't reply to that.

"Well," begins Mo Ran, suddenly earnest. It makes Chu Wanning's heart rate spike with apprehension. "After hearing the news that you want to leave your corporeal form, of course I wanted to see you."

Chu Wanning makes the mistake of turning around to find the other God looking at him with an openly sad gaze. Chu Wanning wonders what the hell happened to him in the past seventy-six years for Mo Ran to look at him so reverently. He violently crushes the spring of hope that dares to root itself in what he thought was a very dead place.

"It was a last-minute decision," he tries to joke. Did that even constitute a good joke? "Are you here to give me a good send-off?"

Mo Ran looks pained, and Chu Wanning doesn't want to know or assume why he looks like that. "You really are going to reincarnate."

Chu Wanning exhales a quiet breath as he lowers Tianwen to the ground. He looks at him with a tired gaze. "There is nothing left for me to do," he says. "I no longer serve a purpose to the mortal realm, nor do I have anything left that ties me here."

I had you once, he silently continues in his head, watching Mo Ran clearly struggle to accept the fact that his heart is set on this decision. *Once upon a time, you were my anchor.*

Mo Ran clenches his jaw. "Is there really anything that won't make you stay?"

Chu Wanning gives a humorless laugh at that. If only he knew. "If you have come here to convince me otherwise, I'm afraid I am not going to be easily moved."

Mo Ran's lips part, the protest clear in his eyes, but Chu Wanning lunges forward to cover his mouth.

"Don't. Do not even think about it," he says, softly. Mo Ran glares down at him, and he glares right back. He hates how his neck starts to ache after a few moments. He doesn't remember Mo Ran being this tall.

Eventually, Mo Ran's shoulders sag, and Chu Wanning lets his hand drop.

"Fine," says Mo Ran. "At least let me stay."

Not that you were invited in the first place, Chu Wanning wants to say. Not in a hateful, mocking way of course. Rather more like in a *why, why are you doing this now* kind of way. He gives a noncommittal hum and nods.

"You can take the south wall," he says instead, tilting his head as if Mo Ran doesn't know where south is. He's doing a terrific job of keeping composed, isn't he? He turns his head to hide his wince. "I know you were never fond of that wall."

He hears Mo Ran give a short laugh at that. "Right," he says. "It's an awful wall."

You're awful, Chu Wanning's mind unhelpfully supplies. *Awful for rousing my heart again like this.*

He should go now.

He turns his feet to strategically retreat, only for Mo Ran to grab him by the wrist again. His shoulders sag. Gods. *What?* he asks with his expression, hoping Mo Ran will realize he wants to be left alone.

"Fuck doing this," Mo Ran says, shaking his head. Chu Wanning bristles, a retort ready to pounce from his lips, but the other harbinger continues on. "Is there anything you wish you completed? Any unanswered prayers you wish you answered?"

Chu Wanning stills.

Regrets. He has a lot of those, but that's something that's best to unpack in the quiet of his own company. Not in front of the source of most of his regrets. Chu Wanning frowns and stares down at his feet, at the dust turning the snow into an ugly grey mush.

There... there is one thing that he never did. One thing that he had failed to do.

Gently, he pries his hand from his grip.

"I do have one wish, though it isn't explicitly mine, per se."

"What is it?"

Chu Wanning purses his lips. "Only one," he begins. "There is one question, a plea that I never responded to." He absentmindedly sweeps at the dust that has settled on his robes, rubbing the grey substance between his forefinger and thumb. "May I ask you something?"

The other God frowns. Chu Wanning takes his silence as an invitation to continue.

"What does it mean to love?"

He hears Mo Ran inhale in surprise. "What makes you ask such a thing?" he asks after a pause.

"Twenty-six years ago, a boy named Yu-er left a letter upon my altar," Chu Wanning begins to explain. His voice is barely audible above the wind of the mountains. He's sure the shame is obvious in his expression. "His household life was not peaceful, and he asked me if I could give him the knowledge to understand what love means and I... I didn't know how to answer him."

Mo Ran speaks after a thoughtful pause. "You should have known how to answer that," he says, soft and slow. "Considering that you loved once too."

Chu Wanning stiffens, but his silence speaks loudly enough.

The God of War scoffs and shakes his head. "At least, I thought you knew how to love."

Chu Wanning is very, very aware those words were just spoken out of spite, out of the complicated chasm that has grown between them both over the years, but that doesn't stop contempt from spilling over his heart and out of his mouth. "No one is asking you to stay," he snaps, slamming down a stone slab awfully close to his foot, and seeing Mo Ran flinch on his behalf makes him feel worse. "I never asked you to come here."

"I didn't mean that," Mo Ran says after a quiet, tense pause. "I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me."

Chu Wanning turns his head away. "You know that we were not meant to love. We weren't made to feel those things," he murmurs. "It made everything complicated."

Their conflicting morals and philosophies. That's what tore them apart seventy-six years ago. Their pride and their stubbornness in sticking to their own ideals pushed them to the breaking point.

The last two great world conflicts were a nightmare Chu Wanning never ever wants to relive. He has seen the rise and fall of countless societies and civilizations, but nothing can ever match the horrors of that time. How dare they try to find peace with each other if they couldn't even bring peace to the world they were sent down to protect?

They never spoke after that. Chu Wanning went into hiding, and while he heard Mo Ran tried to look for him, the other God gave up after fifty years. Chu Wanning had not actually returned to this temple until thirty years ago, but Mo Ran never tried to establish any form of contact with him then, even though he possibly knew Chu Wanning was back here.

Until today, that is.

Fingers brush his chin, breaking him out of his thoughts. Mo Ran tilts his head up, and Chu Wanning feels his heart clench at the sight of the regret swirling in the depths of his irises, at the years of unspoken words written there. "Can we pretend?"

"Pretend what?" Chu Wanning whispers.

"..." Mo Ran lowers his head to press their foreheads together. "Never mind," he says after a few moments, dropping his hands to wrap his arms around Chu Wanning's waist. Chu Wanning is torn between processing the fact that they are *embracing*, and resisting the urge to use Tianwen to make Mo Ran spit out what he wanted to say in the first place.

He settles for moving to rest his head against his shoulder.

"I'm still going to do it," Chu Wanning says. "Regardless of what happens today."

"Regardless of what happens today," Mo Ran repeats against his hair. He feels him inhale a deep breath. *Is... is he smelling him?* "I know. You are as immovable as the mountains we stand on."

Chu Wanning pinches his side. "Don't give me lip," he mutters.

He feels Mo Ran smile. "Sorry," he says, not sounding sorry at all. "... anyway, back to the matter at hand."

"What matter?" Chu Wanning feels so pleasantly warm he thinks that he'll just leave his divine form like this.

"The matter of answering that letter."

"..." Chu Wanning pulls away from him to give him a puzzled stare. "That boy... he should be at least thirty-two years old now," he murmurs, tearing away from such thoughts. "I highly doubt he believes in us anymore. Perhaps he even figured out the answer himself."

Mo Ran shrugs his shoulders. "It wouldn't hurt to try." He holds out his hand and tilts his head to the side. Chu Wanning's eyes sweep over the scars that adorn his skin and selfishly finds himself happy that Mo Ran's hands, capable of great violence, are handling him with such gentleness. "Okay then, never mind about the letter. I'll show you instead."

Chu Wanning raises a brow. "Show me what?"

"Show you what it is to love," Mo Ran simply replies as if he's talking about the weather. "Since you could not answer that question then..."

"Don't be ridiculous." Chu Wanning hates how his heart painfully thuds in his chest. "If this is a cruel joke of yours..."

Mo Ran gives him an earnest look. "I'm not joking around," he says. "At least... before you go." His voice drops, low and soft as he looks at him with pleading eyes. "Please."

Chu Wanning stares at him for a few moments before he shakes his head with a quiet exhale. Does he have the time to ponder the thoughts of the God before him? The Harbinger of Dawn himself, the one who brings victory to all who call for his aid. Perhaps he views this as another unfinished battle.

(But oh, oh how Chu Wanning wants to crush his foolish little heart for hoping otherwise).

"So, what will your answer be?"

He really should say no. He really should.

Chu Wanning purses his lips. "I have things to do," he says with absolutely no conviction, and when Mo Ran gives him a knowing look,

Chu Wanning, either out of pride or stubbornness, pushes on. "I cannot just leave the temple like this."

"I'll clean up everything. I'll sort out all of your affairs," Mo Ran replies.

Mo Ran absolutely would do those things for him, even if it will be at his inconvenience.

"Spend your last day with me," Mo Ran continues, looking at him so softly and sweetly that Chu Wanning finds his resolve crumbling like a house built on sand. "That is all I ask of you."

"You insufferable god," he mutters, resisting the urge to put his head in his hands. Chu Wanning exhales a long suffering sigh and shakes his head.

He reaches out and takes his hand.

He hears Mo Ran inhale a breath of surprise, and when Chu Wanning has the courage to look at his face, he can't help but feel warm at the elated grin Mo Ran gives him as he entwines their fingers together.

"Thank you," Mo Ran whispers. "Truly."

Chu Wanning gives a little grumpy *hmpf* at that, but the smile that creeps up on his lips says otherwise.

Fitting, he thinks as Mo Ran leads him out of the debris. He remembers how he woke up well after sunrise this morning, missing the glorious, muted orange light spilling over the mountains he has called home for the past seven thousand years.

At least Mo Ran will be the last dawn he'll see.

With that thought, he decides to try to enjoy their last day together.

The air warps and twists around them, and suddenly they're not in the secluded comfort of his realm, but in the middle of Sisheng City. At least, what feels like the center of the city from how overwhelmingly *busy* it is.

Traffic everywhere, strangely shaped automobiles, and people wearing little clothing. How has the world changed so much? Chu Wanning feels like he has just been thrown into the deepest part of a lake, and finds himself gripping Mo Ran's hand tighter, curiosity and anxiety jumbling his senses.

"Sorry," Mo Ran says with a sheepish smile. "I should have warned you."

Chu Wanning shakes his head. "It's fine," he says. "It's just a lot to take in so suddenly."

He turns his head north and mournfully looks at the silhouette of his mountains looming over the clouds, versus the mishmash of concrete jungle and ancient architecture that lies at its foothills. He opens his mouth to ask the other god if they could go somewhere nearer his abode, but Mo Ran tugs at his hand, urging him to look his way.

"Come on, there is no time to look back."

"Shouldn't I change?" Chu Wanning whispers, suddenly very conscious of the eyes that follow them as they make their way down the busy street. Each stare that comes his way is like an unwelcome weight between his shoulder blades. How he wishes he had brought his hat veil with him before they left. "Surely modern attire would be more fitting."

Mo Ran smiles. "I think you'll find that you are alright as you are," he huffs, grasping Chu Wanning by the shoulders to turn him around, to show him the real delight of their visit.

Oh, he thinks, a breath of awe escaping him as he takes in the sights before him.

Strung high above the wide, sweeping cobblestone avenue are the prettiest lanterns and the most intricate silk animals (cats? White cats mostly, he notes) Chu Wanning has *ever* seen. Against the snow-covered roofs and the towering skyscrapers in the distance, plus the mountains towering behind that... it's simply breathtaking. Looking to his left, he can't help but smile at the familiar temple pagodas with their silver painted wood beams and pheonixs. The avenue is lined with rows upon rows of carts and stalls selling all sorts of things, from delicious food and snacks, to trinkets, charms, and other wares.

This is a festival, Chu Wanning realizes with a breathless kind of wonder. This will be his first festival since... well, *forever*.

He gets what Mo Ran means now when he says he's fine; it seems like everyone else is wearing traditional clothing too.

When he looks back at Mo Ran, he blinks in surprise at the sight that greets him. It seems like Mo Ran has changed back into his traditional attire as well.

"I haven't seen those clothes in a long time," he says softly, something warm swelling up in his chest at the sight of Mo Ran's sweeping black robes. Memories of the past surface in his mind, squeezing his heart in a funny way.

"Hang on," says Mo Ran, letting go of his hand to pull out a ribbon from his pocket. "I'm not done yet—"

Chu Wanning moves before he can think. "Let me," he says as he gently tugs the ribbon from his hands. Call him sentimental.

"Can you even reach?" It's a question clearly spoken out of genuine concern, but still.

Chu Wanning scowls and yanks him by the ponytail, forcing him to lean down.

"Ow!"

"Now I can reach," he sarcastically mutters, glaring at Mo Ran before he changes his grip to a gentle one, and begins to gather Mo Ran's hair into one hand.

He hears the smile in Mo Ran's voice as he speaks. "Just like before, please."

Chu Wanning gives a little *tch* and curtly replies, "I still remember what you used to style it like, you know. No need to remind me."

Mo Ran gives a warm chuckle. "I'm glad you remember."

Chu Wanning ducks his head to hide his smile.

He's done enough embarrassing things already.

Chu Wanning steps a respectable distance away once he finishes, resisting the urge to keep running his fingers through Mo Ran's hair. "Done," he says, and Mo Ran grins at him sweetly.

"Not done," Mo Ran replies as he shakes his head. "Close your eyes."

Chu Wanning narrows his eyes. "Why?"

Mo Ran pouts. "Just trust me?"

He purses his lips, but closes his eyes anyway.

Gentle hands come to touch his hair, and Chu Wanning feels his own ribbon slip lose as something clips in its place. He finds it cool to the

touch as he blindly reaches up out of instinct. Mo Ran's fingers gently push away his curious hands and mutters, "Patience is a virtue."

Chu Wanning scowls, and feels fingers poke at the wrinkle of his brow. "Stop that."

Mo Ran makes a few more adjustments, and then, "Okay, now you can open your eyes."

Chu Wanning opens his eyes and frowns. "What did you put into my hair?"

"A secret," says Mo Ran with a wink. Chu Wanning rolls his eyes and moves to take it off his hair, but Mo Ran stops him. "Ah, ah. No. Later." Then, he pouts. *Pouts*. "Please?"

Chu Wanning keeps frowning, but relents regardless. "What are we doing here, exactly?"

Mo Ran smiles and grabs him by the hand once more, and tugs him closer as they begin their walk down the avenue. "This is what humans call a festival date."

"Did we ever go on one before?"

"Go on what?"

Chu Wanning clears his throat. "A date," he tries to say along with his cough, but Mo Ran still hears it loud and clear, giving him a wolfish grin in return.

"We did," he says, sounding far more smug than he ought to be. "Perhaps you would better understand it as a more modern form of courtship."

Chu Wanning glances at him. "Is that what you're doing now, courting me?" he blurts out before he can actually think about his words. When Mo Ran stops in his tracks, Chu Wanning would like to actually kick himself.

He braces himself for a teasing remark, only to be met with a sad smile and a warm hand wrapping itself tighter around his fingers. "I think we're well past that stage," he murmurs as he raises their hands to press his lips against them. "Call this making up for lost time in a single day."

"Yes," Chu Wanning replies softly. "I like the sound of that."

Mo Ran smiles, and tugs him closer to his side.

"Alright then," he says. "Where should we start first?"

They try everything.

At one point Mo Ran jokingly asks if he has multiple stomachs, which would have earned him a smack if not for the fact his hands were full of different snacks. Mo Ran is... spoiling him, but Chu Wanning finds himself not caring for once. If anything, he takes secret delight in how all it takes is a slightly sheepish gaze and a pointed look at a particular item, and Mo Ran will immediately buy it for him.

He also tries to get Mo Ran to explain the wondrous device in his hands that allows him to pay for all their food, but the other God just dismisses his questions and distracts him by presenting him with another sweet dish. It's not an unwelcome distraction per se, but as Chu Wanning gnaws on his fifth stick of tangyuan, he realizes how... out of touch he has been with the mortal realm.

Perhaps he should be sad about this fact, but on the contrary, he's happy Mo Ran is showing him these things.

It's a happy send off, truly.

"What is this festival for?"

Mo Ran quietly *eeps*, suddenly sounding very sheepish as he hesitantly asks, "You don't know?"

Chu Wanning feels his cheeks heat. "I still have a hard time reading Simplified Chinese," he mutters with great difficulty, as if he's admitting a very embarrassing fact, and it is, in fact, embarrassing. He gestures to all the signs and says under his breath, "It's all quite frustrating."

Mo Ran tries not to laugh, he really does.

Chu Wanning growls at him. "Oh, be quiet you."

"No," Mo Ran says sweetly, and Chu Wanning threateningly wields his now empty *tangyuan* bamboo stick at him. "Alright, alright, stop that. Promise me you won't laugh?"

Chu Wanning frowns. "You say that as if I laugh so easily."

"Don't make yourself sound so grumpy," Mo Ran grumbles.

Chu Wanning wants to put his face into his hands. "Mo Ran!"

Mo Ran exhales a quiet breath as his expression turns from sheepish to bashful, and he tilts his head away from Chu Wanning's piercing gaze. "It's a festival celebrating your birthday."

Chu Wanning inhales a sharp breath.

"What?"

"I said it's a festival celebrating your—"

Chu Wanning makes an unintelligible noise. "But my birthday is in August, and it's... it's *November*. We are in the middle of winter."

"Don't you think I know that?" Mo Ran says, looking highly offended, completely missing the *point*. "This is a belated birthday celebration since I... well, since I've missed seventy-six of them."

"You..." He parts his lips, eyes wide as he takes in the man before him. To say that disbelief is what he feels right now would be an understatement. He looks at their surroundings then and feels a million emotions swell up inside of his chest as he asks, "You did this all... for me?"

Mo Ran, a legendary, feared war God, shuffles and looks down at his feet. "Yeah."

Oh.

Oh.

Chu Wanning truly doesn't know what to say. Or feel. He's feeling too many things at once. He feels like combusting where he stands. He wants to ask *how*, *when*, or about the monumental effort it must have taken Mo Ran to plan this in a *day*. Even if they are Gods, something of this magnitude cannot just be easily conjured out of thin air.

"Mo Ran," he calls out. "Look at me."

The other God looks.

"Thank you," is all that comes out in the end, and while he's absolutely terrible at expressing how he feels in the right way without making anyone misunderstand... well, he hopes Mo Ran can see the sincerity in his eyes at least. "Everything... everything is truly beautiful."

"Yeah?" says Mo Ran. Chu Wanning quietly reaches out for his hand, and Mo Ran, after a hesitant pause, takes his hand too. "I'm glad you like it."

Chu Wanning shakes his head, but he's smiling. He thinks this is the happiest he's been since then, until—

Do you really want to push through with it? whispers a small, sad voice at the back of his mind.

He squeezes Mo Ran's hand and wills that voice away for now. It's selfish, it's reckless, but he's had enough of wallowing in the past.

He'll try to live in the now, even if it's only just for one day.

It's well into the evening already, with a full moon and a clear sky. Chu Wanning was sure it was supposed to heavily snow tonight. He wonders how on earth Mo Ran coerced Jiang Xi into changing the weather. Jiang Xi is known to stubbornly stick to his schedules. His arguably ironic behavior as the Harbinger of Nature was often something all eight of them used to tease him about. Perhaps retirement has made him soft.

Speaking of retirement... Chu Wanning bites his lip and looks at the God beside him with a guilty frown.

Unlike Mo Ran who doesn't need sleep, judging from his bright disposition and his strong qi, Chu Wanning is starting to feel the weight of their day together pull at his body, but he doesn't have the heart to tell the other God this. He's rather dismayed at himself for getting so tired despite the bright, energetic atmosphere around him, but he does his best to conceal his fatigue. If he was shameless and had a thick face, he is fully capable of pinching a little qi from the God beside him, but Mo Ran would notice straight away and fret over him.

There's one last surprise apparently, Mo Ran tells him so as he leads him away from the busy street, and that thought alone is enough of a reason to keep going on.

"We're leaving already?" Chu Wanning asks.

Mo Ran hums. "No, no. We're just looking for a better view point." His eyes twinkle with mirth. "You'll see what I mean when we get there."

One would think that as someone who lives on a mountain, height would not be a problem, but as Mo Ran leads them towards what is

clearly a steep cliff, Chu Wanning feels his chest tighten with dread. Why couldn't they just teleport? Why are they *walking*?

He grumbles and glares at the back of Mo Ran's head.

"Hm?" says Mo Ran.

"Nothing," Chu Wanning says, far too quickly. It takes all his effort not to wince, especially when Mo Ran stops to narrow his eyes at him, so he quickly asks, "Are we almost there?"

"Just a little bit further." Mo Ran clearly looks like he wants to say more, but Chu Wanning tugs him forward, ignoring his own instincts screaming at him to stay on flat, safe lowland—

Chu Wanning lets out an undignified yelp as he feels himself being lifted into a *bridal carry*. "What are you doing?" he hisses, struggling to sit up as he looks around for any other people in sight, though the fact that it's just them still doesn't make this any *less* embarrassing.

Mo Ran grins, and leans in close, so close their lips brush against each other. Chu Wanning sucks in a very, very deep breath.

"I know you hate heights," he whispers, and then has the audacity to look smug as he pulls away.

Chu Wanning *rages*, manifesting Tianwen as he threatens to thwack Mo Ran across the head with it, but Jiangui is quick to manifest too, binding his wrists together in a tight grip. "Mo Ran!" he yells, kicking and swinging his legs like a child, but Mo Ran is unperturbed by his behavior, and carries on walking up to the cliff. "If you were aware of my disposition when it comes to heights, then why are you bringing me here?"

"It's worth it." Mo Ran smiles. "I promise."

There's a lone wooden bench waiting for them when they get to the top. Chu Wanning dare doesn't look down at the edge of the cliff, even if the view of the city is absolutely fantastic here.

Mo Ran has the wherewithal to look nervous as he asks, "You're not going to do anything right?" He gestures to Tianwen as he tugs at Jiangui.

Chu Wanning gives him a flat look as he settles on the bench. "Just untie me."

Mo Ran lets Jiangui dissipate. Chu Wanning finds it hard not to laugh as Mo Ran watches with wary eyes as he tucks Tianwen back under his sleeve in its bracelet form.

Mo Ran still stays standing.

"Oh come here," Chu Wanning snaps, reaching across to tug him down by his sleeve, and when Mo Ran does eventually sit down, he entwines Mo Ran's hands in his. He turns his face away as he rolls his eyes. "I guess you could be forgiven," he mutters.

The God of War lets out a little offended huff. "I'm not that bad to look at," he mutters with a dramatic sigh. "Stop looking away from me."

You are, thinks Chu Wanning, like the lovesick fool he is. *You are quite bad for my heart.*

"Ah, it's starting," Mo Ran says, taking Chu Wanning by surprise. All the lights around, above, and under them turn off, plunging the city into darkness. Though the distant sound of traffic can still be heard on the wind, there's a certain quiet that settles between them both. Anticipatory. Waiting.

Mo Ran nudges his arm as he whispers. "I hope you'll like it, Wanning."

"I'm sure I will," he says, and then he turns to the sky.

A beat of silence, and then—

A lone spark rockets upwards with a quiet whistle.

Bang!

Great big words appear across the sky in a flash of brilliant colours and lights.

This Harbinger Wishes His Baobei A Very Fond Farewell

Then a smaller firework explodes beneath it.

(And A Very Belated Happy Birthday.)

Mo Ran's delighted laughter pulls him out of his shock.

Chu Wanning feels his heart swell with so much fondness that tears begin to form in his eyes. His throat tightens up with so much emotion he feels the inexplicable urge to perhaps kick the Harbinger of War into

the next lunar year. “You fool,” he whispers, covering his eyes with the back of his arm so Mo Ran doesn’t see him cry. “You sentimental, silly man.”

“I suppose,” says Mo Ran. “But I’ll always be your sentimental, silly man. Even when you’re gone, I’ll always still be yours.”

That only serves to make Chu Wanning cry harder.

He hears Mo Ran sputter and panic beside him. “Wait, are you—”

“Yes, I am crying,” he snaps, batting at the hands that reach for him. Mo Ran’s arms fall to the side, making him open, defenceless for Chu Wanning to easily hit and punch at his chest. “Damn you for making this harder than it already is,” he spits, glaring at Mo Ran despite his pathetically swollen eyes and runny nose, conveying all the love and hate he has for him all in one stare. How *dare* he do this to him. How dare Mo Ran be so stupid to love someone so pathetic and fickle as he is! What a fucking *idiot*. “Damn you, *fuck you*. How dare you—”

He sees Mo Ran shake his head. Before Chu Wanning can rage at him, and ask what that little head shake was about, Mo Ran surges forward to cradle his face and give him the most tender, most gentle kiss they have ever shared.

Chu Wanning wishes the fireworks were noisy enough to drown out the thunder of his own heartbeat, but he knows Mo Ran can hear it, feel it, from the way the grip upon his hand tightens.

The evening sky kindles into hues of red and gold as more fireworks explode, outshining the stars above them, but all Chu Wanning can see is the dark behind his shut eyes, all he can feel are the soft, trembling lips against his own.

After he eventually gets over the shock of being embraced, of being *held* like this, he eagerly begins kissing back. It’s not the perfect kiss with the way their teeth clack against another, and it’s clear how... out of practice they both are, their mouths starting to ungracefully collide as it turns heavier and hungrier.

They don’t part until they both run out of breath.

“Are you quite done?” says Mo Ran with a breathless laugh.

Chu Wanning lets out a choked sob at that, torn between punching him or kissing him.

He chooses the latter option, pulling him down to shut him up instead with his lips.

dawn

It nears midnight now, at least, judging from the position of the stars.

The fireworks stopped long ago, and they stopped kissing after that too, much to Mo Ran’s disappointment, but while it was leading into something *more*, it wouldn’t have felt right to do *that* now, certainly not outdoors in the bleak cold.

So here they are, embracing instead. Holding each other close.

It’s now or never, thinks Mo Ran as he turns his head to stare at the God now lying in his lap. His star.

Chu Wanning looks happy. Why can’t that be enough of a reason to make him stay? Mo Ran can make him happy. Make him feel love, *wanted*. They are in a different time now, where things are *okay*, where they both can be free without the chains of their conflicting philosophies tearing them apart.

So why, *why* does Chu Wanning want to leave so badly?

Silence and misunderstandings have torn them apart many times. As an immortal, time should be nothing, insignificant even, but every moment, every hour spent with Chu Wanning has always been precious.

They say it is tiresome to love someone for a long time, even more so for eternity. There have been many opportunities where he could have fallen out of love with Chu Wanning, but that’s never stopped his foolish heart from yearning.

Chu Wanning rises from his lap, looking at him with a solemn expression as he whispers, “It’s time.”

Mo Ran feels like he’s swallowing iron splinters as he calls out his name. “Wanning.”

“Hm?”

“You do know I never stopped loving you, right?”

Chu Wanning smiles sadly at that. “Me too,” he whispers.

Mo Ran reaches out and curls his fist against his chest, crushing the fine silk of his robes between his fingers.

"I don't want you to go," he says in a painfully small voice, desperate, bereft, *aching*. "Now that we are not burdened by our duties, did you not think there are other options for you?" He exhales a shuddering breath. "There's... there's just so much to say. So many things to *do*."

Chu Wanning squeezes his eyes shut. "No," he quietly replies. "I didn't think that at all. I felt like there was no purpose for me to stay here." Mo Ran feels trembling breaths against his skin, watches regret sinking deeper into Chu Wanning's heart as he refuses to see what he could have had. "We couldn't afford to be selfish then."

"But how about now? I'm here, aren't I? We're here. Unburdened and no longer tied to our duties." Mo Ran cradles his face. "If it is my apology that you seek, I will kneel down at your feet and beg for your forgiveness for the past."

"That's not it at all," Chu Wanning gently replies as he reaches down to pry Mo Ran's hands off his collar to press his palm against his heart. "From the moment we descended into the mortal plane, our life forces have relied on the faith of human beings."

"This body is dying, Mo Ran." Chu Wanning looks at him with a tired, pleading gaze. Begging him to understand. Begging him to let go. "You do not feel such a thing yourself because there will always be war. The humans still need you." He points to himself as he says, "They do not need me anymore. I am only delaying the inevitable if I do not do this now."

"No," Mo Ran snarls with such vehemence it makes Chu Wanning flinch. "They may not need you anymore, but I do. I need you." He shakes his head, feeling his throat close as his eyes grow hot with the threat of tears. "Surely you can plead with the Upper Court. You... you have done *so much* for this godforsaken realm surely you can—"

Chu Wanning's sad, heartbroken gaze makes the rest of his words die in his throat.

As the God of War who brought countless victories to those that prayed for his help, over the years, Mo Ran slowly came to be known as the *Harbinger of Dawn* in the Western tongue. For in the legends that revere him so, for the battles that he fought and won, he brought light,

hope, ending their dark days of war for them, promising longevity and another day.

His own dawn, his own light in the dark is leaving him.

Unlike the tales and myths humans so love to tell, the bitter reality is that fate can never be defeated, divine being or not.

He can only watch with shaking hands as Chu Wanning reaches into his sleeve to pull out a small vial.

Chu Wanning reaches out a hand. "Hold me?" he asks, soft and quiet. His final request. The finishing blow.

With the realization that he has lost this battle, Mo Ran can only nod, tongue and heart numb as he pulls him close to his chest.

"I promise our time will come," Chu Wanning whispers the words like they are a sacred oath, and they are. Mo Ran watches him as he opens his eyes and looks at the yawning night sky with a gentle smile before they turn to him. "In another life, we will be together again. That I know."

Chu Wanning has always been beautiful, whether in rain, sun or snow, but right now he's glowing.

He's glowing like the stars he's about to rejoin.

Then, without any ceremony or fuss, he drinks the entirety of the bottle.

dawn and knowledge

It doesn't take long for the poison to kick in.

The glass slips from his grasp, landing with a muted *thunk* onto the snow.

The stars are blurring together now, calling for him to come home.

"I'm very tired, Mo Ran."

"Then sleep," Mo Ran whispers in reply, cradling him close to his chest even as he feels his robes begin to sink beneath his fingers. "You've done well, Wanning. Thank you for your hard work."

Chu Wanning smiles up at his gentle visage, reaching out a trembling hand even as his skin begins to turn into dust. Fragments of him glow a brilliant white as he withers and fades, and each piece swirls

and dances up into the night sky as he rejoins the constellations he so revered in his life.

“Thank you for showing me what it is to love.” He smiles, true and sincere. He hopes it conveys how much he loves Mo Ran. “Good night, Mo Ran.”

By the time Mo Ran finds the breath to say good night back, the stars have long flown away, the lingering tendrils of the night swallowed by the dawning sun.

All that’s left in his hands are white robes and a golden butterfly clip.

Dear Yu-er,

On behalf of Yuheng, I would like to apologize for replying twenty-six years later.

He has set off on a very important journey to the stars and won’t be back for a long time.

Perhaps you have stopped believing in Gods, and you might take this as a joke, a silly prank... but I hope the more open part of your heart, the one that brought you to Yuheng’s temple when you were a child, lost and hoping, will be inclined to believe otherwise.

You asked him what it means to love, and even as the Harbinger of Knowledge, it was a very hard question for him to answer properly. To figure out what it means, he even sought out my counsel for this matter. He had mused that perhaps you had found out the answer for yourself already, but what is life if not learning and relearning things everyday?

Love has no true definition.

It is subjective, meaning love is whatever we make it out to be. We can love others through our actions, through the big and the little things that we do for them. It’s very easy to say “I love you” to someone, but to prove it, to properly show it is the part that takes the most courage. Even when there are hard decisions that must be made, to love is to understand that not all things can go the way we want them too, and that we must learn to let them go even if it breaks our hearts in the process.

But with the advent of time, we all learn to grow around our grief.

Love can break.

But love has the power to bind and tie us together too.

I see that you’ve already found your own definition of love. Your husband is indeed a lucky man.

Live well, and may the blessings of heaven carry you through life.

Sincerely,

The Harbinger of Dawn.

???

years later

(love.)

Winter is inching into spring.

The streets are covered with what is essentially slush. Gone is the picturesque snow-blanketed Sisheng city as the canals begin to thaw and the roofs begin to clear. Snowdrops begin to pop up here and there on previously dormant flowerbeds. It’s still pretty cold, and as the dawn begins to spread over the city, it paints the buildings and the barren trees in hues of muted orange, creating a majestic image with the mountains in the background.

Chu Wanning, who has actually been cooped up inside his apartment for *days*, is glad that he went out for a walk this morning. He softly smiles as he lifts his phone to take a picture of the scene.

Except, just as he presses the button to take the picture, firm arms wrap themselves around his waist, making him almost drop his phone in return.

“Hi there,” whispers a voice in his ear, teasing and fond. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Chu Wanning rolls his eyes, but the smile that creeps up on his face belies his initially annoyed expression. “Do you mind?” he grumbles, even as he turns to press a chaste kiss upon a tanned cheek. “You shameless man.”

“Yeah, but I’m *your* shameless man.”

“Mo Ran!”

“Ehe.” He can hear the grin in his boyfriend’s voice. “Have you decided what your thesis topic is going to be? Am I allowed back in my own bed now? Can we sleep together again—”

Chu Wanning turns around to give him a fierce glare.

Mo Ran nervously laughs. “As you were,” he awkwardly chuckles.

“Tch,” Chu Wanning’s glare melts into a soft frown. “I do know what my topic is going to be. I found inspiration in your grandfather, actually.”

Mo Ran’s grin falters. “What,” he says, dumbly.

Chu Wanning gives him a dismissive wave and shushes him when he gives an indignant whine in return. “Let me explain,” he says with a firm look. “Remember that letter he was talking about over dinner last week?”

Mo Ran rolls his eyes. “It would be hard to remember about any other letter, considering it is the only thing he talks and brags about most of the time.” When Chu Wanning give him an unimpressed look, he narrows his eyes. “Come on, you can’t really believe he actually got that from a God, right?”

“Don’t be rude,” Chu Wanning chides. “You know how much he treasures that letter.”

Mo Ran sighs. “I know, I know. Anyway. Back to the topic at hand. Why is my grandfather your muse exactly?”

Chu Wanning gives him an incredulous look. “Don’t tell me you’re *jealous* of your own grandfather...” he says with disbelief.

“No (read: yes),” Mo Ran denies.

“Listen,” Chu Wanning says with an exasperated sigh. “Have you even read the letter?”

“Of course I have.”

Chu Wanning purses his lips. “Your grandfather was kind enough to scan it for me and give me a copy for me to keep,” he says. He absent-mindedly picks at the fluff stuck to his hoodie, rubbing the fur between his forefinger and thumb. He’ll remind Mo Ran to comb Goutou later. “May I ask you something?”

His boyfriend frowns. Chu Wanning takes his silence as an invitation to continue.

“What does it mean to love?”

“Oh?” He hears Mo Ran laugh in surprise. “I have a lot of things to say about that,” he murmurs, wagging his brows as he leans down to

brush his lips against his. “I can definitely give you a demonstration of one way to show you love— *ow!*”

Chu Wanning pushes his face away. “Shameless,” he hisses, feeling his cheeks warm as Mo Ran laughs.

“Right,” he wheezes. “Sorry, continue.”

Chu Wanning crosses his arms. “My thesis is going to be on the language of love. Not in a poetic way, more like in a technical way.”

“That... sounds very unromantic.”

Chu Wanning gives him a flat look. “This is going to be a thesis, not a submission for a story competition.”

Mo Ran grins. “That should be easy for you,” he says, and then grins as he adds, “Considering that you *love me*.”

Chu Wanning sputters. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“It has to do with *everything*,” Mo Ran instantly replies. “Let’s go then.”

“Where?” says Chu Wanning, looking at him with a confused frown. “What are we doing now?”

Mo Ran shrugs his shoulders. “Research I guess,” He holds out his hand and tilts his head to the side. He smiles softly and presses a kiss upon his cheek.

“Let me show you what it is to love.”



PART II.
THE TIES THAT BIND US

Found





How We Learn to Love

BY JORDAN

Sometimes you meet someone and the universe tells you yes, this is it, this is your person, the *one* for you. There are different words for it, depending on who you ask.

The thing is, once you have it, the *one*, it's really hard to let them go.

Chu Wanning has always loved Mo Ran's smile.

Mo Ran smiles in a way Chu Wanning never has, doesn't think he will ever be able to: open and honest, love and warmth in every dimpled curve and line on Mo Ran's face. Eyes sparking with a gentle tease, a welcome that says *'I'm here, I love you, let's go home'*.

Perhaps that's why Chu Wanning is distracted enough to not notice the demon that pounces on them both.

In the space of one blink, one heartbeat, Chu Wanning sees Mo Ran's smiling face, and then Chu Wanning sees nothing but dirt and then blackness.

It hardly seems fair at all.

The thing is

The thing is

The thing is—

—the universe doesn't care about fairness.

Chu Wanning wakes up and his nose itches.

He tries to deal with this sensation, certainly intends to reach up and scratch or smack his nose, but he finds he can't. His hand doesn't obey his brain. Curious, alert now, Chu Wanning takes stock of his mind and then his body: awake, eyes closed and crusted like he's been asleep, mouth dry, teeth sticky, limbs heavy with sore muscles. He cycles through his meridians — his core, weak as it is prone to be, is seemingly fine.

Perhaps he had a hard fight, he thinks. Or a simulation given as yet another test for him to pass.

Nose still itchy and scrunched up, Chu Wanning listens, and hears nothing but the low humming of an air conditioner, and a little beep.

Oh, Chu Wanning thinks after a moment and recognizes the noise: Hospital.

He is not wholly unfamiliar with them, though it has been some time since he was injured enough to land in one. Or stay in one for a while, it seems.

The degree to which his body feels sluggish and his eyes are crusted with sleep and whatever else lends itself to the idea he's been here for more than an hour or so.

Curious and now annoyed, Chu Wanning forces his eyes open, cringing and blinking furiously at the bright light. It takes a few long seconds for his eyes to adjust enough to look around. He's in a private room, square in shape, with a window overlooking a river. The bed he's on is nice. On the opposite side of the wall, above an old style clock, is a green and vermilion etched phoenix. The wings are outstretched, head proudly raised.

That symbol he recognizes, but he doesn't know why he would be in one of—

The door opens, swinging wide and just missing hitting the wall and its door guard. Chu Wanning sees first the back of someone tall, taller than him, in a worn looking cotton shirt. Black and soft paired with black jeans and boots. The person's hair is short, too. They walk into

the room backwards, turning around and curiously ensuring that the door closes softly by catching it with their boot to slow the way. A broad back finally gives way to its owner.

Chu Wanning blinks as a young man — handsome, his mind whispers — takes a full step away from the closed door with a tray in hand. Dark hair, tanned skin, wearing clothing that looks nothing like what Chu Wanning knows the nurses or medical staff wear here, unless the hospital and sect's owner has changed their policy. That seems unlikely.

"Oh. *OH!*" the man says, having looked up to see Chu Wanning is awake and staring at him. His eyes are dark, but in the harsh light overhead, glint like the deepest amethyst geode. "Wanning," the man breathes his name with such familiarity Chu Wanning blushes and then glares. Just who in the hell—

The door opens again and actually bangs into the man's back, who hasn't come close enough, seemingly frozen in place at seeing Chu Wanning awake. He grunts and only barely manages to keep the tray in his hands from falling or spilling over.

"What the fuck are you doing?" an annoyed voice asks, and now Chu Wanning has two people in his room. Stepping around the frozen man, his white coat pressed perfectly and whisking against his slacks, a familiar face comes into the room like he owns it. Which, he did. "Didn't I tell you to go home?"

"I did—"

"...did you." Droll. Wide eyes reminiscent of the mists coming off the river outside the window slide over to Chu Wanning. Chu Wanning receives an annoyed look from behind square glasses. "Ah. Mr. Chu, you're finally awake. Nice of you to rejoin us."

"He is!" says the man still holding the tray, face splitting wide in a smile that shows off twin dimples.

"Didn't I tell you he would." The monitor is checked first and then Chu Wanning's wrist is taken between cold fingers, two fingertips pressed to his veins. A familiar spark of spiritual energy reaches out to touch Chu Wanning's own. Chu Wanning doesn't watch, warily still looking at the man who stares at Chu Wanning like he knows him.

When his wrist is released, there comes the tap of fingertips on the tablet, with the clucking of a tongue following. “Your core seems fine, if abysmal as always, Chu-xiansheng. Your vitals are strong. The injury to your shoulder has closed over entirely, no infection. Any residual pain?” he asks in a bored tone.

Residual from what, Chu Wanning thinks crossly.

He looks at his shoulder, notices the gauze and bandages wrapped around it. He looks at his hand too, the one that had been held, and notices the reason he couldn’t move it earlier while waking up: his hand and forearms are swollen and bruised to hell, a splotchy painting of purples and greens and yellows.

“Wanning, are you—”

Chu Wanning jerks his head up and barks, “Who the hell are you?”

The hands, still holding that blasted tray even now, spasm and then tighten so hard the knuckles turn white. A gold band on his ring finger shines under the fluorescent lighting. The smile falls, dimples disappearing to give way to shock openly displayed.

“Ah,” Jiang Xi hums and looks up from his tablet. He sounds engaged now for the first time since entering the room. “That’s interesting.”

“Amnesia is not uncommon with certain demon encounters.”

“Not uncommon?” Mo Ran asks. He’s frowning, his hands clenched along the top of his thighs.

Chu Wanning cannot stop looking at those hands, in particular that gold band around Mo Ran’s finger. The same type of ring that’s around Chu Wanning’s finger. That he hadn’t noticed. Until now. Until Mo Ran had, stumbling over his words with a forehead creased in confusion and unease and *fear*, said that Mo Ran was Chu Wanning’s husband.

Which Chu Wanning had laughed at and said couldn’t be possible.

To which Jiang Xi had snorted and said *no, that part was true, you are married*.

Chu Wanning asked if the doctor had hit his head as well, which earned him a nasty sort of smile and a much tighter grip around his wrist to check his spiritual energy and core again.

Now, dressed in a pair of soft leggings and a loose shirt, Chu Wanning sits in front of Jiang Xi’s dark wooden desk, next to his *husband*, and tries to keep up with the conversation floating around him. He picks at the hem of his shirt. It’s something he never would have picked out for himself, too relaxed from his normal button downs and pressed pants. But they fit him, the clothes. They are clearly Chu Wanning’s — just not what Chu Wanning remembers.

He doesn’t remember a lot, it seems.

“He hit his head, didn’t he,” Jiang Xi intones flatly. What would be a question from any other person comes out as a derogatory statement from the doctor. That hasn’t changed, Chu Wanning notes. The man used to be insufferable at any of the sect conferences.

“I don’t, I don’t understand,” Mo Ran says. “Jiang-daifu, you said his spiritual core is fine, and so is his energy. There’s no curse or anything?”

“I’m right here!” Chu Wanning snaps, focusing fully on the conversation. He shakes his head, turning his face to fully look across the desk. He does not, *does not!*, keep looking out of the corner of his eye at Mo Ran next to him. “There’s no curse,” he asks, lips flattened into a straight line of displeasure.

“No,” Jiang Xi says. He sighs and then proceeds to educate Chu Wanning and Mo Ran both on what amnesia seems to be affecting Chu Wanning. “It could pass,” he finally ends with, shrugging his shoulders beneath an emerald shirt, white coat behind him on the chair. “Time will tell.”

Here’s what Chu Wanning is told:

Mo Ran and he were attacked on a routine demon hunting excursion.

Chu Wanning took the brunt of the blow, hence the shoulder damage and other bruising, and apparently knocked his head around.

Chu Wanning was asleep for three days.

Chu Wanning woke up and somehow no longer remembers the last five years of his life.

Chu Wanning also has a husband now.

Here's what Chu Wanning knows:

His shoulder hurts.

His head hurts.

He no longer lives in Linyi.

He also apparently no longer works for Rufeng or with his adoptive father.

He has a husband with shoulders broader than Chu Wanning's and hands to match.

He has a *husband*.

"Would Wanning like anything to eat?" Mo Ran asks after they pull out of Guyue'ye private clinic's parking lot and drive for a few miles.

"Jiang-daifu said I should stick to mild things for a few more days," Chu Wanning says. He's curled onto his side, curved to face out the window. Outside the river follows their route.

Before they left, Chu Wanning had thought for a moment about calling Huaizui to come and get him. He's not a stupid man. He knows when not to trust strangers, when not to believe in someone, and certainly waking up with no memory of the man standing across from him counts as such. But Chu Wanning doesn't have his phone on him, naturally, given the circumstances, and Jiang Xi had confirmed that indeed Mo Ran was Chu Wanning's husband. Chu Wanning was *his* husband.

Chu Wanning doesn't remember the Guyue'ye sect leader as being a liar. Other things, yes, but not a man who lied.

That, and the gentle smile Mo Ran gave him had been enough to get Chu Wanning into the car. Plus the burning curiosity at seeing their home — surely something there would spark Chu Wanning's brain into revealing the past five years.

"En," Mo Ran agrees and turns the car around a corner. "But is there something you want in particular? I kept all of Wanning's favorites in the fridge for when you came home."

Mo Ran says this as casually as he calls Chu Wanning's name. The intimacy prickles at Chu Wanning's skin. He doesn't recognize it or understand it.

Turning his head to look at Mo Ran, Chu Wanning apologizes instead of answering what he wants to eat. "I'm sorry. This must be frustrating for you." He folds his hands into his lap, worrying at the metal around his finger.

Mo Ran turns away from the road to give Chu Wanning a smile. A flash of those dimples. He breathes out slowly and shakes his head. "No, don't be sorry. It's not Wanning's fault. It can't be more frustrating than it is for you."

Chu Wanning frowns. He supposes that can be true. Still, it feels like he should say sorry. Again and again.

'Do not be a burden. Do not be useless. Do not cause problems.' Lessons from Huaizui. Those Chu Wanning remembers.

"Besides," Mo Ran interjects, breaking Chu Wanning's negative thoughts with a cheerful tone. "The doctor said Wanning's memories will come back! So we just have to trigger them."

Home turns out to be a two bedroom apartment in a warehouse that's been converted into living spaces. The ceilings are high, stretching far above what would be normal, giving the living room and small kitchen the appearance of being bigger than they are. The floors are old wood, creaking as Chu Wanning follows Mo Ran inside. He toes his simple shoes off, noting the heavier boots and soft slippers on the shoe rack.

Home also turns out to be where they have a dog.

Chu Wanning freezes, bent over the shoe rack, as the *jingle-jangle* of a collar and skittering feet announce the arrival of the dog. Short wiry fur that tufts up in brown curls and four legs rush to bump into Chu Wanning's thigh. Barks and whines and the dog presses its head into Chu Wanning's stomach, obviously seeking affection.

"Hello," Chu Wanning whispers quietly.

Animals have never really loved him all that much. Cats won't come near him no matter how hard he's tried to coax them.

"Oh!" Mo Ran reappears, head sticking out of the kitchen's entrance. He clicks his tongue and gives Chu Wanning a sheepish look. "Sorry, forgot that uh, well, you wouldn't know. This is Goutou."

"We have a dog?" Chu Wanning asks and pats the top of Goutou's head. His ears are soft, and he gives Chu Wanning's fingers excited licks.

Mo Ran watches them and nods. "You wanted to adopt him."

"Oh."

"You remember that?" Mo Ran asks excitedly.

"No," Chu Wanning answers and watches the way Mo Ran's face falls. A shuttering of that light for a moment before a tight smile replaces that hope. "Sorry."

"No," Mo Ran says firmly. "Don't be, Wanning. It's fine."

Fine.

Chu Wanning has a husband and a dog and that's fine.

Mo Ran disappears back into the kitchen. Noises follow: the sound of cabinets being opened, drawers, the metal rustling of something, and then the sound of a burner being turned on.

Curious, Chu Wanning pushes himself to stand up. He gives another awkward pat to the top of Goutou's head and then steps forward cautiously, finding the option of looking at what Mo Ran is doing is preferable to venturing further into the apartment to explore. He finds Mo Ran braced against the open door of the refrigerator, looking down at its contents studiously. The fridge is well stocked, from what Chu Wanning can see, and he instantly thinks Mo Ran must be in charge of this part of their lives. The amount of fresh vegetables and fruits, the carefully and neatly packaged leftovers, and the clear liquid broths give it away.

Chu Wanning cannot cook to save his life.

He doubts that has suddenly changed in the last five years.

Gaze slipping past the food contents, Chu Wanning eyes the flex of Mo Ran's arm on the fridge door. Those broad shoulders...

"Something you like?" Mo Ran asks, noticing that Chu Wanning has come to join him.

Chu Wanning flushes at the question, turning his head to the side. He tilts his chin towards the ceiling.

Mo Ran laughs, genuine and warm-sounding. "I meant the food, Wanning. Is there something you want to eat? I made, well I made

a lot of things while Wanning was asleep in the hospital. I had to do something. Ah." Mo Ran sighs and taps his fingers on the side of the fridge door. "Nevermind. I could make some fish soup for us. I have the broth already."

Chu Wanning nods. "That..." He clears his throat and continues softly. "That'll be fine."

Chu Wanning leaves Mo Ran to do whatever it is in the kitchen, and drifts through the apartment. Goutou follows for a bit but then curls up on a dog bed twice his size underneath a windowsill being used to house several orchids. None of them are in bloom, Chu Wanning notices, as he peers at the plants. Their stalks cut short, but they don't look dead. He thinks of Mo Ran's large hands and wonders what Mo Ran looks like taking care of them.

There's other things too: a worn-in leather couch, a few blueprints framed on the walls for whatever reason, some other plants mixed in. Books rest everywhere — whether on actual shelves or stacked on tables and some on the floor. Pictures of the two of them in various places. Even of their wedding, where they look so happy, a shy smile on Chu Wanning's face. He doesn't think he's ever made that type of expression before. The first room to the right is clearly the bedroom, and Chu Wanning flushes, his fingers twitching at his side as he sees the large bed that must be where he sleeps next to Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning has never kissed a man, or anyone actually, that he can recall. To wake up and be told that he has a husband that would rival any model in looks, and who is a god in body, and that they sleep in the same bed...

He turns away from that and to the second room. It's larger than the bedroom actually, taken up by huge windows along the eastern wall and a long table that dominates the room. The table's covered in metal parts, scraps, and half-put together mechanical pieces, and more blueprints and papers.

Chu Wanning steps fully into the room and goes to the table. His knees bump into the long sitting bench as he picks up one of the half-completed parts: a gauntlet missing the last two fingers.

"They're yours," Mo Ran says, voice quiet in the doorway.

Chu Wanning turns to the side so he can see both Mo Ran and the room. He holds the metal hand, brow furrowed. "I made these?"

"Yeah." Mo Ran smiles, and there's pride in his voice as he goes on. "You had this whole idea to make these guardians that would help protect people who lived close to the ghostly barriers. It's why we got this place, so you could have space to build. Your little robots."

There's teasing and warmth in the way that Mo Ran says *'your little robots'* that suggests this is an old joke of theirs.

Chu Wanning nods even as the joke slides over him like water in a sluice. He rubs his fingers over the metal plating. The explanation Mo Ran gave means nothing to Chu Wanning. No memory there to fill in, no reason to say *a-ha*, because what Chu Wanning knows is that he had this guardian idea. He voiced it only once, and never again, because Huaizui told him it was a waste.

He sets the hand down, follows Mo Ran to eat, and stays quiet throughout dinner.

Mo Ran lies in the dark listening to Goutou snore. The couch isn't super comfortable and his back will definitely be sore in the morning, but there wasn't any way Mo Ran was going to make Chu Wanning take it to sleep on. No, Mo Ran can suffer on the couch. For a day. Or two. Or however many until Chu Wanning's amnesia goes away.

His heel thumps against the end of the couch.

Mo Ran doesn't think himself a very religious person or a lucky person. He'd only been lucky to meet Chu Wanning one day after returning from overseas on a business trip for Uncle. Fate or whatever that Chu Wanning joined Sisheng Limited and Mo Ran was there too.

The only lucky thing in Mo Ran's life had been Chu Wanning.

It seems cruel now that he doesn't remember Mo Ran at all. Or maybe it's deserved. Mo Ran was a bastard before Uncle and Auntie took him in.

Maybe this is life settling up.

No, Mo Ran thinks and stares up at the ceiling in the dark. The amnesia will go away. It will, and then Mo Ran will have his husband again, in their bed just twelve feet away — he will see Chu Wanning's

shy smile in the morning before he fully wakes, his flushed angry face when Mo Ran teases too much, his reddened eyes and mouth slack in pleasure as Mo Ran teases even more.

Chu Wanning will remember. And then they'll be fine.

They'll be fine.

They settle into an awkward rhythm after that.

After the brief moment where they both stood in front of the bedroom doorway, and Mo Ran told Chu Wanning to have the bed and he would take the couch, that's how it goes for days and days.

Chu Wanning sleeps in a bed he doesn't know, curled up like a ball in the middle with the sheets stuffed around him. When he worked at Rufeng he didn't do very much sleeping, between training, teaching others, and whatever Huaizui directed him to do for the Nangongs. His bed was another place to work and often he had various weapons, talismans, or papers around him to cover the bed.

When he asks what Mo Ran does on the fourth day that lets him stay in the apartment, Mo Ran tells him that they take on odds and ends cultivating jobs for those who can't really pay.

Chu Wanning scrunches his forehead as he takes this in. "We do?"

Mo Ran nods around a mouthful of noodles. A tiny jar of chili paste with a crusted-over top sits next to his glass. Chu Wanning's noodles are clean and unsliced in contrast. "You, uh, you really wanted to help people. And I loved that about you, so that's what we do."

Mo Ran goes on more about how Mo Ran used to work on a team with Xue Meng at Sisheng Limited but left with Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning listens, part of him absorbing all of this and wondering just how he left Rufeng and Huaizui to be at Sisheng in the first place, but the other part of him is stuck on Mo Ran's casual way of saying *'loved that about you'*. Noodles halfway to his mouth, no stumbling over the words, just *saying* it.

Chu Wanning eats his noodles and wonders what it says that even though he cannot remember, he *believes* Mo Ran's words. He craves them to be true.

Chu Wanning can tell that Mo Ran is trying to be patient.

He never presses Chu Wanning for anything, never pushes him all that hard — more like gentle pressure with how he tries to give Chu Wanning his tools and blueprints, and says, *oh this was your next project you wanted to work on, does this jog anything? Does this pathway we always take every Saturday morning to walk Goutou extra long remind you? What about this cart that makes the best steamed buns?*

Mo Ran takes Chu Wanning to dinner and then to dinner again and again. Their normal regular places where even the workers know Chu Wanning's favorites. Mo Ran takes him to a dessert shop and holds chocolates up to Chu Wanning's face to try.

"You like these," Mo Ran says with a grin.

Chu Wanning eats the offering, opening his mouth without a second thought. He does like them — the chocolates and Mo Ran's feeding them to him. He can feel his mouth quirk at the corners, a tiny smile stealing over.

It's just that what is a habitual and constant memory, a practiced routine for Mo Ran, is all new for Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran is patient. Endlessly so.

Chu Wanning is not. Never has been.

Mo Ran cradles his phone between his shoulder and his ear, shoving some laundry into drawers. "Ah, Mengmeng, I don't know if dinner is a good idea."

"*Don't fucking call me that,*" Xue Meng shouts. On the opposite end of the phone wherever, Mo Ran can hear the dulled voices of a television. "*You two used to come every other week, that was the promise when you left Sisheng. It's been three weeks!*"

"Yeah, yeah it has been, but he doesn't remember anything—"

"—*so bring him and maybe he will!*"

Mo Ran listens to Xue Meng continue to rant about how Mo Ran and Chu Wanning should come to dinner, and then on how last week Xue Meng had to push the older Mei Hanxue out of the way to stab a demon. It's inane chatter that normally Mo Ran would want to be four

beers in before listening to. Now, though, Xue Meng's blind optimism and stupid problem are things Mo Ran clings to.

"Okay," Mo Ran finally interrupts, rolling up a pair of socks to stick away. "Sure. We'll come."

Dinner at the Xues is almost too much.

Chu Wanning hovers behind Mo Ran's taller form at the front door, the small walled courtyard at his back and the shut gate beckoning as an escape route. The Xues live further out from the city. The sun has set and white flowers open their petals as the moon ascends. Chu Wanning recognizes the pollia bush — though not from here, and not from this yard, but another.

Escape is denied when Chu Wanning is ushered into the warm house, Mo Ran's loose grip around Chu Wanning's wrist tugging him forward.

Even worse is when Xue Zhengyong greets him loudly with a "Yuheng! Welcome, welcome, come in!"

Chu Wanning blinks and stares, noticing that Xue Zhengyong's beard has grown thicker, a bit of gray at his temples, more laugh lines on that open face than Chu Wanning's brain remembers. Sisheng Limited had been a bit of a joke at Rufeng.

Chu Wanning had never laughed at what anyone else said about the Xue brothers and their goals.

He salutes Xue Zhengyong respectfully. "Xue-zunzhu."

Xue Zhengyong laughs, waving a hand. "There's no need for that—"

"—move, get off of me, get out of the way, idiot!" A blur of blue barrels around the corner, and a body weasels its way beneath Xue Zhengyong's arm and Chu Wanning finds himself faced with Xue Meng. A Xue Meng who is older and taller and less gangly. "Chu-laoshi! Laoshi, you're alright!"

Laoshi.

A Xue Meng who calls him teacher now.

Chu Wanning feels irritated suddenly at Mo Ran's reluctance to fill in every bit of the past five years. Whenever Chu Wanning has asked for more, Mo Ran fed him bits and pieces, saying he didn't want to overwhelm.

He doesn't know if it would have made him feel any better now, to have his missing life read to him like a detached story, but maybe it would have.

"Meng'er." Xue Zhengyong laughs and puts a hand on his son's arm. "Don't crowd."

Maybe it would have because then Chu Wanning would have known, could have lied or tried to pretend a bit. While Mo Ran has been nothing but easy fake smiles and nods that it's okay Chu Wanning doesn't remember, Xue Meng lacks any sort of ability to hide the disappointment and hurt on his face at Chu Wanning's amnesia.

Chu Wanning shreds his napkin to tiny pieces underneath the table as everyone else talks and laughs their way through the meal.

Jiang Xi's office smells like white florals and the cigarette he must have finished before coming in to see them.

"Why are you here?" Jiang Xi asks after he sits.

Chu Wanning worries at the wedding ring around his finger. Beside him, Mo Ran opens his mouth, leaning forward, but Chu Wanning cuts him off. "I haven't remembered anything."

"And?" Jiang Xi's tone is droll, the expression on his face clear: you two are wasting my time.

"And?" Mo Ran's voice dips low, a growl at the edge of his words. "Don't you think that's a fucking problem?"

Jiang Xi ignores Mo Ran and turns his gaze only to Chu Wanning. "I remember saying specifically that they might not ever come back. Were you not listening?"

Chu Wanning had been listening. He just hadn't wanted to believe it.

Chu Wanning sits through another set of scans, exercises, his wrist touched to check his core as well.

Nothing is different.

"You like wontons," Mo Ran says, beaming across the kitchen, elbows on the counter. Next to him rests a bowl of mixed filling, wrappers laid out ready to be filled and then pinched closed. It's all assembled neatly.

Do I? Chu Wanning thinks.

From the living room plays an old record. Goutou crowds the kitchen entryway, eyes trained on the food as if just waiting for some to drop.

Out loud, Chu Wanning asks, "Do I?"

He's eaten plenty in his life but does he actually like them? He cannot connect anything fiercely to them so much as to *like* them. Food had been something necessary to keep his core functioning and himself alive so that he might be of use.

Mo Ran picks up a wrapper and wags it in Chu Wanning's direction. He smiles, dimples in full display. "You made them for me on our fourth date. You watched a video for hours, you said, till you got them right. And then you asked me to teach you how to make them better, even after I said Wanning's wontons taste like Heaven and didn't need any improvement."

Chu Wanning's stomach feels like someone just dropped a stone in it. His skin itches, his body feels hollowed out and empty.

"I didn't know," he says quietly there in the space of the kitchen. *Their kitchen.*

Mo Ran shrugs like it doesn't matter. His smile doesn't fade, but it does flag. The lines bracketing the corners of his mouth deepen, but his voice remains cheerful as he says, "We started making them together once a month at least. A little date night."

Chu Wanning can hear his heartbeat in his ears, feel his lungs struggle to fill.

"—I thought we could make them tonight, see if it—"

"I don't want to," Chu Wanning blurts out. His fingers curl into fists at his sides, fingernails biting into his palms as he squeezes harder.

Mo Ran falters. His eyes go wide, smile frozen in place. "Ah, you might like—"

Might.

Might.

Something ugly claws its way up Chu Wanning's throat, pushing that stone out and barking out in harsh tones. His words are horrible as he says, "I won't. I won't like it. I don't know how to make wontons and I

don't know what our dates are or what we do on them or any of this." His chest heaves.

Mo Ran reaches out with the hand still holding the wrapper. "It's okay—"

Chu Wanning's hand reacts before he can think, caged in as he feels, and smacks aside the peace offering. The wonton wrapper falls to the floor with a plop. "Don't!"

Mo Ran freezes. His face, for once, for the first time since this entire ordeal began, is raw and naked with hurt. "Alright, Wanning."

Chu Wanning flees to the bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

In the morning Chu Wanning slips out of the apartment with Goutou on a leash.

He walks himself and the dog along a pathway that curves towards the water. The leaves have turned golden and then brown now, late fall settling in. Wind picks up the long ends of Chu Wanning's hair and tosses them about his face.

Perfunctory, Chu Wanning sits down on a bench and pulls out his phone. It's not the first time he's thought of making this particular call. When he'd scrolled through his contacts and not found Huaizui listed at all, Mo Ran had only made a tight faced smile and said Chu Wanning didn't like to talk about his adopted father anymore.

Chu Wanning can tell Mo Ran isn't telling him the full truth.

But Chu Wanning wants to know, and he cannot stop thinking about the hurt look on Mo Ran's face. All the little ways Mo Ran has tried to hide how clearly disappointed he is in having a husband who doesn't remember him. Mo Ran doesn't deserve that.

It's Mo Ran's crushed expression from last night and how Chu Wanning's ugly words were the cause of it that spurs him to manually thumb in the phone number he does remember.

Luckily, Huaizui hasn't changed his number in five years. The voice is familiar, and Chu Wanning shudders as he hears the "Hello, who is this?"

At his feet, Goutou whines and puts his head down on Chu Wanning's shoe.

Chu Wanning finds the voice to say. "Something happened."

"I think it would be best if I return to Rufeng."

Chu Wanning can't bring himself to look at Mo Ran as he says this. He busies himself instead with putting clothes in a suitcase. *Coward, Chu Wanning, you're a coward*, he thinks.

"Wanning," Mo Ran breathes, and it sounds like someone punched him. Or bruised his throat. His name is a wounded rasp from Mo Ran's mouth. "You don't want—"

Chu Wanning's shoulders shake and the shirt he stuffs down into the suitcase wrinkles horribly. "Well," he says, swallowing heavily. "You don't know what I want. And I don't know what I did to leave Rufeng. I think I need to know. You won't tell me so, I have to go."

Huaizui had said he would send a car. It's probably downstairs by now.

Chu Wanning forces himself to take one step and then another, brushing past Mo Ran standing in the doorway. He forces himself not to look back.

And he forces himself to go down the stairs and out the door and into the waiting car.

"You just let Chu-laoshi go?" Xue Meng asks. He's busy poking at the orchids Mo Ran needs to water, a file full of papers still in his other hand.

It takes Mo Ran a full minute to process the question. He's on the couch, where he's been since Chu Wanning disappeared out the door not a few hours ago. He eyes the folder Xue Meng brought, the offer of a hunting job in it, like when it used to be just him and Chu Wanning — Xue Meng had snottily offered it last week, saying that Mo Ran couldn't continue to hole up and not take jobs.

"I didn't have a choice," Mo Ran finally says. He sounds pathetic as he says it, he can hear it in his own voice.

Xue Meng's face scrunches up in something like disbelief. "You," he starts to say and then stops. If Mo Ran hadn't been as shocked and upset as he currently is, it would be funny to watch Xue Meng grit his teeth

and acknowledge, "You two are married. You hang off of Chu-laoshi everywhere you go. You don't even let me sit next to him at dinners."

True.

Mo Ran is quite sticky and obsessive over Chu Wanning.

How could he not be?

"He wanted to know what happened," Mo Ran says and reaches for the folder as a distraction. Sisheng Limited is the only modern sect left that still does everything this antiquated: with pen and paper.

Goutou huffs from his dog bed. Even their dog is annoyed with Mo Ran.

"So why didn't you just tell him? Rufeng is full of assholes! We hate them, we always make fun of them at the meetings, and you know they were horrible to—"

Mo Ran flips through the assignment details as Xue Meng grumbles about Rufeng. Easy enough demon to get rid of. Bugui could handle it on its own probably; Mo Ran just needs to get the dust off his blade. Killing demons and ghostly specters is easy enough.

Or should be.

Mo Ran winces internally at that flippant thought. After all, the hunt that should have been easy is the current cause of this entire predicament. And isn't that all Mo Ran's fault? He should have been faster, should have been paying attention.

How could he keep Chu Wanning here with him when it's his fault in the first place Chu Wanning cannot remember him?

Mo Ran had vowed to take care of Chu Wanning forever.

It's the same reason why he hadn't the heart to tell Chu Wanning why he'd left Rufeng, why he viciously cut out his adopted father and told Mo Ran he never wanted to talk to that man again.

Mo Ran has hurt Chu Wanning enough.

"MengMeng," Mo Ran interrupts loudly. "Let's go subdue this thing. I bet you dinner I can get to it before you."

Xue Meng squawks, whipping away from the orchids and glaring hotly at Mo Ran. "You won't! And I want hotpot when I win."

Mo Ran can at least count on being able to manipulate his cousin. That remains a constant.

Rufeng is the same.

Chu Wanning finds it a comfort at first.

The buildings are the same: a sprawling complex nestled in the forest that gives the illusion the large corporation is less business-like than what it is. Everyone all seems thrilled that Chu Wanning has returned, slick smiles pasted on their faces as he walks the halls. Chu Wanning cannot remember this many people ever being interested in him. Not him personally. They like the work Chu Wanning does, the strength he brings, the exclusivity at having one of the most powerful cultivators in their hold.

But Chu Wanning is mostly ignored and left alone to do his work. Or he had been.

No one talked to him before.

No one checked in on him.

No one made him hand pulled noodles perfectly flavored to his tongue. Or washed his clothes and gave him their too-big sweater to pull on. Or spent an afternoon making mouth-watering lotus pastries for Chu Wanning to eat all but one of instantly. No one got him a dog simply because apparently Chu Wanning wanted one. No one made sure he had fresh socks every day because he knew Chu Wanning's toes could get cold easily. No one put a big warm palm on the middle of Chu Wanning's back to guide him.

None of the colorful prints or green plants exist in the apartment here for Chu Wanning. Strangely, it doesn't look all that different for five years having passed. He wonders for a moment if Huaizui had kept it this way because he thought Chu Wanning would always come back.

But then, Chu Wanning admits to himself, what is there to change in a space that is mostly plain white walls and nothing else? A place to sleep when Chu Wanning's body gives up. That's all this is.

Chu Wanning doesn't know what it says that it takes him too long to fall asleep in his bed here.

"Why did I leave?" Chu Wanning asks Huaizui after a morning spent teaching new disciples how to repair barriers.

This is an old habit, and part of it makes Chu Wanning breathe a bit easier. He has been giving lessons like this since he was sixteen. His memories are full of this.

Huaizui gives him a quick look over the edge of the tablet screen he's busy with. It's a dismissive look. A look that says don't waste my time. That too is familiar. "Does it matter? You're here now."

Chu Wanning's tongue curls along the roof of his mouth. His adoptive father has been telling him things like this his entire life. Lying. Leaving things out. All for Chu Wanning's good.

Chu Wanning is used to this.

It's different though from how Mo Ran didn't tell him the story. He doesn't know why, but the two sit and taste different in his mouth as he takes in their white lies and refusals.

"Why do we even come to these things," Xue Meng grumbles at Mo Ran's left. Despite his bitching, he's got a glass of expensive whisky in hand. His second of the night so far.

"Because Uncle asks us to," Mo Ran replies in the same way he does every time. Which is the truth. These big sect meetings to worry about and play pretense over the state of the modern cultivation world are a bore and a half, especially with all the rich sects here that could not give less of a fuck about the people they protect so long as they can take their money, but Xue Zhengyong attends them faithfully because *he* cares.

Thus, Mo Ran and Xue Meng are here too.

Well, Mo Ran would be lying if he said he hadn't been eager to go tonight because he thinks Chu Wanning might be here too. He'd sent one text to Chu Wanning in the three weeks since he left, just asking if Chu Wanning was alright, if he needed anything.

If he needed Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning had taken two days to respond and with an '*I am fine.*'

Mo Ran loves him. He'd laughed at receiving the response, how perfectly Chu Wanning it was, and how much he knew his husband was lying.

He's on the hunt for his husband. He just needs to see.

And then Mo Ran spots him, dark slacks and a white button up, his suit jacket uncomfortably stiff in an ill-fitting way. Mo Ran still thinks Chu Wanning is the most beautiful person here.

"Right," Mo Ran says and claps his hand absently in the direction of Xue Meng's shoulder. An *oof* tells him he landed close enough. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Me?!" Xue Meng hollers at Mo Ran's back as he walks away from Xue Meng. "You don't do anything stupid!"

Chu Wanning hates crowds.

He hates people, he hates being at these fussy events, but he's never been able to avoid them entirely. It wouldn't reflect well on Rufeng or Huaizui to not have Chu Wanning attend.

It doesn't mean Chu Wanning doesn't take the opportunity to skirt outside for a break in between the speeches and dinner. It's cold outside but he doesn't mind. The bite of winter air is welcoming. Chu Wanning steps down into the manicured garden, dress shoes making tiny noises on the stone tiles. Around him the outdoor lights turn on with his movement.

"Wanning!"

Chu Wanning turns instantly at the sound of his name in that voice. His heart flips over in his chest at the sight of Mo Ran there at the head of the pathway. Mo Ran is dressed up too but somehow he looks casual in his dark pants and shirt, which is open at his throat. Chu Wanning's hands fist loosely at his sides so he doesn't do something incredibly stupid like reach out. He left. "Mo Ran," he murmurs softly.

Mo Ran smiles, and Chu Wanning is struck dumb with how beautiful he is, with that smile on his face, with those dimples, and with how much he *missed* Mo Ran.

Missing someone he doesn't have any context for, who still is a big set of empty puzzle spaces in Chu Wanning's brain.

"I just," Mo Ran says, taking a step forward and then stopping. He runs his hand through his hair, tousling the longer strands towards the front. "I just wanted to see if you were all right."

Embarrassment and an aching sort of wonder flood Chu Wanning, heat up his face. He's glad it's dark so maybe Mo Ran can't see. "Who says I'm not!?"

A soft laugh. Mo Ran nods. "Yes, yes, Wanning is always alright." Mo Ran's smile tips sideways. He makes a little gesture towards his head. "Still nothing?"

Chu Wanning shakes his head. "No. Rufeng's doctors agree with Dr. Jiang. They likely just won't come back now."

Whatever Mo Ran had been about to say is interrupted by the calling of Chu Wanning's name. Repeated as both of them stare at each other in the garden, only a few feet separating them, and then louder as Huaizui himself appears behind Mo Ran.

Huaizui's gaze flicks between Mo Ran and Chu Wanning, a shrewd look on his face. He smooths it out and beckons to Chu Wanning with an impatient twist of his fingers.

Chu Wanning goes, his heart hammering in his ears, but not before he notices the undisguised anger in Mo Ran's gaze at Huaizui. Or the wedding ring Mo Ran still hasn't taken off.

Later that night Chu Wanning twists his own wedding ring between his fingers.

"Why did I leave?" Chu Wanning asks again.

Huaizui blinks and shakes his head. "Chu Wanning, we've been over this. It doesn't matter—"

"It does," Chu Wanning says forcefully. He smooths his hands out flat on top of the table. "It does. I came back, I called you, because I couldn't understand why I would have left my responsibilities here, my care for people, but I think I understand now."

There are no blueprints or half-built hands and guardians here. There are no orchids, no dog, no long Saturday walks just because.

Huaizui watches Chu Wanning with an expression that almost succeeds in being a blank one. Almost. If not for the disappointment and anger coloring his gaze. "Do you?"

"I think I was happier not here." Chu Wanning looks down at his wedding ring. "I don't remember it, but I *feel* it."

"Feelings are—"

"Irrational. A weakness. I know." Chu Wanning finishes his adopted father's lesson. He stands up. "Goodbye."

In the end, it's not hard to find Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning doesn't have to call him, even though that would be the easiest, and even though he unlocks his phone to do so, staring at the contact he never deleted at all. His thumb hovers over **'Mo Ran'**. He thinks about pressing call and what he would say, asking Mo Ran to come down, come outside. And then what. His mind whirs with endless possibilities.

Chu Wanning doesn't get the chance because as he's standing there imagining scenario number three, he hears:

"Wanning?"

Startled, Chu Wanning spins around at the sound of his name — the syllables so lovingly said. His heart aches to hear it, a gentle throbbing pain that he's *missed*.

Chu Wanning has missed Mo Ran.

And that really is why he's here now. That's all that matters.

"I missed you," Chu Wanning blurts out. Apparently his brain has decided there will be no more second guessing or scenarios to ponder. He looks Mo Ran fully in the face. Snow falls in fat flakes around them both, a dusting having collected on Mo Ran's shoulders and wool hat that says he must have been out somewhere and walked back.

Mo Ran blinks, backlit by the lamps on the street. The lights cast him in half-shadow, making him even more handsome as he stands there, mouth slack, eyes wide. He looks at Chu Wanning like he's just seen a ghost. Or a miracle.

Chu Wanning flushes under Mo Ran's heady gaze. "I don't," he starts to say and then pauses, fumbling. His tongue feels clumsy for a moment but then he clears his throat, shaking it loose. "I don't remember still."

"Okay—"

"But that doesn't matter," Chu Wanning hurries on to say. He doesn't think he could bear making Mo Ran look upset. Not like before when

he'd been so horribly wrong and left. He never wanted to see Mo Ran look that way again. Or worse, if Mo Ran doesn't want him anymore. "I might never remember but—"

Chu Wanning hasn't had enough time to ponder out his apologies, how best to say them, how much he wants to ask for now. They all trip and pile up on his tongue.

Mo Ran knows though it seems. Somehow. Improbably. Mo Ran knows.

"But you're here," Mo Ran says when Chu Wanning's voice fades out. A boyish smile steals over his face, dimples evident even in the evening light. He takes a step closer.

Chu Wanning does too. "En," he agrees. He looks over at the front door of the apartment building. Then to further up the street behind Mo Ran. "Do you want to go get something to eat?"

Mo Ran's smile deepens, naked delight all over his face as he laughs. His breath puffs out white to mix with the snow. "Are you asking me out, Chu Wanning?"

Chu Wanning feels his face heat up even more. He nods, a jerky little movement that makes his teeth clack. "So what if I am?"

Laughing again, Mo Ran takes another step and falls to Chu Wanning's side. Their arms brush through their coats. His eyes glint that special purple-black as he looks down at Chu Wanning. "Alright, Wanning. Wanna try somewhere new?"

New.

Chu Wanning leans his arm against Mo Ran's as subtle as he can. A failure judging by the eyebrow waggle he receives. Huffing, he says, "That would be nice."

Mo Ran's laughter chases them up the street, and Chu Wanning's heart beats in time with it.

Interrupted Connection

BY ZAN

I *don't normally do this.* The screen of Mo Ran's phone lights up where it's sitting on his stomach. He shifts, picking it up as the television blares in the background.

He grins at the message, texting back a *but is it as fun as I said it would be?* before turning his attention back to the show. In a rare move, he's decided to spend this Friday night at home with his TV, too drained from work to do anything fun. Not that he minds; he's vicariously living through a friend he's pretty sure is going to a bar for the first time in their life.

No. The reply is quick and comes with a picture of an electric green drink sitting on the counter of a dimly lit bar. Mo Ran snorts and responds with a sticker of a laughing cartoon husky.

Baby steps, Mo Ran types, then tacks on for good measure, *You're doing great.*

His phone is silent for thirty seconds, so he assumes his friend is attempting to socialize at whatever bar he's in. Mo Ran's tempted to ask the name, but anonymity is one of the main tenets of this friendship, so he doesn't push.

Mo Ran met this friend on a niche web-novel forum six months ago; Mo Ran had just been looking for spoilers on a plot point for one of

his guilty pleasure reads at three in the morning, as one does, when he stumbled across a hilarious argument on a thread.

He decided to log in as a troll and promptly got banned before signing up again, choosing to behave the second time around. Mo Ran had taken the side of one beidou_immortal, seemingly the only person who actually read the novel. Despite the fact they were both drowned in a sea of rage comments afterwards, Mo Ran got a private message from the user he'd backed up and from there, they managed to strike up conversation.

At first, they only talked about the novel. Mo Ran's not inclined to share his more nerdy tendencies with the people he knows in real life, so it was nice to have someone to geek out with over something he enjoys. They didn't exchange numbers, but they did shift their conversation into another messaging app where they still preserved their anonymity. Mo Ran calls himself Weiyu, and he doubts the other man's name is actually Xia Sini. Yet somehow along the way, despite these drawn boundaries, their conversation started to bleed into other topics too.

First it was funny things they saw online, then through the course of their day. Mo Ran asked Xia Sini's opinion on a book, then Xia Sini had asked him if he had been too harsh in rejecting an amorous advance from a girl at his work. Mo Ran's not quite sure when the line got blurred and they started to talk to each other about their day to day lives, but he doesn't mind. Xia Sini has a dry and cutting sense of humor Mo Ran enjoys immensely, yet gives him the faint impression of someone who's reserved in real life. Xia Sini himself has told him that he was raised extremely sheltered, which has led him to being closed-off as an adult, and that he's not as social as he wants to be.

None of that comes through when Mo Ran talks to Xia Sini, but he knows that how one person is online can completely belie how that person is in real life. Xia Sini admits that he tries to be nice, but his face is naturally stern in an ugly type of way, and he can't help that people are scared of him before he even approaches them. Mo Ran supposes that's why he enjoys the cloak of anonymity that comes with being online.

He doesn't know what the other person looks like, but Mo Ran imagines someone lean and austere and somewhat like his extremely rigid and uptight manager at work. However, said manager at work has a face that has been clearly blessed by his ancestors, and haunts Mo Ran's dreams at night despite Mo Ran's best attempts to think of literally anyone or anything else. Mo Ran does his best not to transpose that face onto the character he's built for Xia Sini, but Xia Sini kind of already reminds him of his manager.

A manager that Mo Ran, for the better part of the past year, has had a huge crush on.

This too he's told Xia Sini — the crush part, not the fact that the manager and Xia Sini seem to share a naturally standoffish nature. Xia Sini is the only one Mo Ran's ever told; no one else would believe him, given how often he seems to butt heads with his manager.

He doesn't tell Xia Sini it's his manager. Xia Sini just infers the person has a position of authority in Mo Ran's life that he constantly challenges, the person doesn't hide how he doesn't like Mo Ran, and how the person looks incredibly hot in his aggressive white and neutral clothing. Mo Ran's pretty sure Xia Sini thinks he's got a crush on his teacher, which Mo Ran is fine with.

Xia Sini in turn tells Mo Ran that he likes someone too. Someone out of his league who also hates him, he claims. It's another one of the things they bond over; being hopelessly infatuated with someone who shows no indication of liking them, even in a platonic or general way. The guy is a colleague of his that won't look his way once, let alone twice, and they also regularly argue. But he's tall and well built and has a smile that Xia Sini has called *nice*, which is the equivalent of an entire soliloquy from the reticent man.

Mo Ran's tried to visualize this person but comes up short each time, so he resorts to suggesting one shameless line to Xia Sini after another. Xia Sini rejects each one of them tersely, sometimes calling Mo Ran shameless, something that Mo Ran *definitely* hears in his manager's voice.

Xia Sini does, however, seem to listen to Mo Ran's suggestions on how to improve his social life. Or at least he appears to. For example,

right now — Xia Sini, at Mo Ran's encouragement, had finally said yes to hanging out with his coworkers after work. He's at a bar, he's told Mo Ran, and though he can drink everyone under the table, the experience is not as fun as he thought it'd be.

Mo Ran's phone buzzes again, breaking his focus from the game show he's been watching. The message is from Xia Sini, saying, *I think someone just tried to hit on me*. Mo Ran snorts and replies with a *you think?* and the response is instant.

I didn't realize it till they started to walk away.

From Mo Ran, *You should go get them.*

I'd rather not. They asked me if their shirt would look better on them or on my floor and I told them I didn't like the style of it so I wouldn't ever take it.

Mo Ran barks out a laugh at this. The image he has in his head of Xia Sini starts to morph, drifting from looking like his manager to looking like the extremely proper and elderly Liu Gong, who mans the front desk of Sisheng.

Before he turns his attention back to the television, he texts *hey at least you made it out*.

The other thing Mo Ran likes about their friendship is the sense of satisfaction he gets from hearing Xia Sini claim to apply his advice.

Mo Ran's well-loved by most of the people around him, save for the aforementioned manager. He's got his two closest friends working alongside him, and he's popular both at work and at whatever bar he goes to afterwards. Though with the latter, it fluctuates based on whether he brings Xue Meng and Shi Mei, or the Mei brothers with him. Anyways, he's got a wealth of social advice to dispense, and it pleases him to see someone actually take it.

Well, as far as he knows. Xia Sini could also just be someone dicking around with him, but Mo Ran chooses to believe in the good. Part of it may or may not be because his friendship with Xia Sini feels like an echo of what a friendship with Chu Wanning could have been like, if Chu Wanning's default tone wasn't aloof and derisive and Mo Ran didn't automatically resort to thinly veiled insults.

It's not that Mo Ran set out to antagonize Chu Wanning when he started at Sisheng. It was just that Mo Ran has an outgoing and stubborn personality, while Chu Wanning is equally stubborn, but introverted. They clashed regularly and still do, though Mo Ran has defanged the words he throws Chu Wanning's way. He knows that while Chu Wanning's default settings seem to be either stoic or acerbic, the man does work hard and despite all the admonishments he so readily delivers, he always has his team's back.

Mo Ran hadn't always seen it that way, but two years ago, Chu Wanning had readily taken the fall for something that Xue Meng, Shi Mei, and Mo Ran had messed up at work. No one lost their job, but Chu Wanning had to be reprimanded in front of the board, something that was no doubt a great blow to the prideful man. He had kept the trio's names out of it completely and since then, Mo Ran finally saw Chu Wanning in a new light. Admittedly, he's had this crush on and off since he was a wide-eyed intern and first laid eyes on the cold and elegant man. Even at his most pissed, he's still wanted to at least get Chu Wanning in his bed and teach him a lesson.

But now that he's able to talk to someone who's so similar to Chu Wanning, Mo Ran feels like the understanding he has of his manager has grown even deeper, and it tangles in with his crush. Mo Ran's already been working on his patience, but it jumps tenfold, and when Chu Wanning snaps at him at work, he's not as quick to immediately bite back. Not that Chu Wanning does that often anymore. He's recently started to soften, probably worn down by the weight of the whip he wields over the small department he manages.

Either that, or Xue Meng is right about Chu Wanning having always been nice and Mo Ran being too thick to notice it.

It doesn't matter though. At work, Mo Ran is now kinder towards the man he likes, despite knowing there's no chance in hell Chu Wanning will ever like him back. And online, he's able to coax another person out of their shell, the same way that he sometimes wishes he could do to Chu Wanning.

Xia Sini listens to him well. Even if he were lying, it would be quite an invested lie, because he likes to send Mo Ran proof. Of the drink he

gets at a bar when he finally agrees to a night out, of the new restaurants he tries, ticket stubs for movies he finally goes to see, even if he's going alone, all to prove to Mo Ran that he's listening to his advice. It feels like a mutually beneficial relationship, and it feels nice to have a friend that seems to understand you beyond just a surface level.

One evening, a few weeks after Xia Sini finally goes to a bar with his co-workers, Xia Sini sends Mo Ran a picture of a takeout container from a restaurant that he said he's always wanted to try, but has been too crowded for him to want to venture in. The logo is comedically unfortunate, and looks rather familiar. Mo Ran zooms in to the tiny address stamped at the bottom.

It's strange, realizing the person who you've been texting for months now lives in the same city as you. Even if said city is large and densely populated — that restaurant is within the area where Mo Ran lives and works. Xia Sini being so close to him feels like kismet, so much so that Mo Ran temporarily forgets about their unspoken pact of anonymity.

Hey, Mo Ran texts impulsively. Have you ever thought about meeting up? I think we're in the same city.

He doesn't expect a reply — after all, they've not even shared pictures of themselves with each other. Meeting each other in person would be a huge step, specifically for someone like Xia Sini. But the thought that they might be nearby starts to stir some restlessness in Mo Ran. Mo Ran doesn't lack friends, but he feels like he's grown uniquely close to Xia Sini over the past couple of months, and wants to finally put a face to the formless person he's been chatting with. Undoubtedly there would be some initial awkwardness, but Mo Ran has faith in his interpersonal skills.

...that is, if Xia Sini even agrees. He could flat out reject Mo Ran, or worse, completely ghost him and stop replying. Maybe Mo Ran has crossed a line, and Xia Sini will decide to cut and run. Before Mo Ran can start to worry over that train of thought though, his phone buzzes with a new message.

It's a succinct *sure*, but it still has Mo Ran breaking out into a grin.

The cafe they pick is not too far from Mo Ran's house. They agreed to wear pins to identify themselves; Xia Sini has already sent a picture of his own golden haitang pin to Mo Ran, and last night Mo Ran had sent a picture of his own red pin, shaped like a small dog's paw, something he scrounged up from his junk drawer.

The excitement grows during the fifteen minute walk to the cafe. This entire week, he's been imagining what it will be like meeting Xia Sini. He wonders if he will be as funny in person, or if he'll be more reserved and introverted. Xia Sini has already told him not to expect much, but Mo Ran can't help building eager anticipation. He runs a hand through his hair and checks his reflection in the storefronts that he passes; it's not a date, but Xia Sini is still someone he wants to impress.

However, there is one thing that he doesn't anticipate as he goes up the stairs and enters through the cafe doors, and that is seeing an unassuming and familiar face tucked away in the corner of the cafe. Mo Ran blinks as he sees Chu Wanning sitting with a book at a tiny table, a plate of half-eaten dessert behind him. He's wearing a crisp white dress shirt and a tie, like he's come straight from work.

It isn't till Mo Ran catches the glint of something against Chu Wanning's shirt pocket that his brain quickly adds what he sees with the fact that Xia Sini had texted him he'd get a table at the exact same place Chu Wanning's sitting. Mo Ran squints and — though it's from a distance, that golden pin is undoubtedly familiar.

Mo Ran immediately turns on his heel and exits the cafe.

As he descends back down the steps, Mo Ran feels his higher brain functions shutting down. Of all the people Xia Sini could be, did it really have to be *Chu Wanning*? Mo Ran's brain is still trying to compute the fact as it simultaneously understands that Chu Wanning would *not* take Mo Ran being Wei Yu well.

If Mo Ran goes back in, he most likely risks losing both a friend in Xia Sini and whatever little goodwill he's scraped together with Chu Wanning. The temptation to run is strong, but Mo Ran just leans back against the brick wall and quickly yanks off the red pin he had stuck

to his shirt. His phone buzzes and sure enough, there's a message from Xia Sini. Chu Wanning.

Shit.

Are you close by?

Mo Ran's tempted to reply and cancel the whole thing before running away. His brain however is stuck on the image of Chu Wanning sitting alone in a cafe, waiting for someone who won't show. He remembers what Chu Wanning had told him as Xia Sini, about how people just don't seem to want to be around him, and Mo Ran feels a twinge in his heart.

Then there's also the fact Mo Ran doesn't think he can actually tear himself away from Chu Wanning, not at a time like this. The thought of spending time with Chu Wanning is too alluring, beckoning Mo Ran over his cowardice.

Mo Ran drags a hand over his face, unsure what to do as on the side, his brain combs through every interaction he has ever had with Xia Sini. No wonder Xia Sini had reminded him so much of Chu Wanning — it had been Chu Wanning that Mo Ran had been gently coaxing out of his shell all these months. Hadn't Chu Wanning become nicer at work recently? Was that all Mo Ran's doing?

Chu Wanning's face flits across Mo Ran's mind again, and his legs make the decision before his brain can catch up.

This time when Mo Ran walks into the cafe, he pointedly does not look in the direction where Chu Wanning is sitting. He stares at the menu instead, squinting like he's going to get anything, and tries to naturally drift his gaze around the shop. He catches Chu Wanning staring at him. Swallowing down his nerves, Mo Ran raises a hand and waves. Chu Wanning just stares in return.

Mo Ran doesn't rush over immediately; he buys a coffee and a small cardboard box of mini lotus pastries first, before ambling over to Chu Wanning's table.

"Hey!" he calls out, and Chu Wanning is clearly pretending he hasn't heard, staring at something very intently out of the window. Maybe he's looking for Weiyu, and guilt tinges Mo Ran's conscience. "Hey, Senior Chu!"

He's loud enough that Chu Wanning has no choice but to look up as Mo Ran approaches, something like trepidation on his face. Ignoring the way his stomach feels like it's filled with butterflies, Mo Ran puts on an amicable face.

"Is this seat taken?" Mo Ran asks, and doesn't wait for a response before he tugs out the chair and sits down. Before Chu Wanning can reply, Mo Ran pushes the box of mini-pastries towards him. "Here, take one."

Chu Wanning silently stares down at the delicate pink pastries. By the pink crumbs on his empty plate, Mo Ran doesn't doubt that he's already tried them; they're some of Chu Wanning's favourite desserts.

"What are you doing here?" Mo Ran asks as Chu Wanning finally pinches a small pastry out of the box. Chu Wanning pauses and narrows his eyes at him, and Mo Ran tries to not let his nerves show. He can see the gears turning in Chu Wanning's head, probably as he thinks of a polite way to fob off Mo Ran.

"I like their pastries here," Chu Wanning replies a moment later, and Mo Ran hums in response. "What are you doing here?"

"Hanging out with you," Mo Ran quips, and Chu Wanning gives him a flat look. "What, you don't think I make good company?"

Chu Wanning with a *hmpf*, and Mo Ran tentatively tries an, "I was just visiting a friend in the area."

Now would be a good time to tell the truth, maybe bring out the pin, just so that the two of them can have their moment of embarrassment then put it behind them. Yet, the words refuse to come out of his mouth.

"Did you need something?" Chu Wanning asks pointedly after thirty seconds of silence pass, and Mo Ran shrugs.

"Can't I just run into my favourite manager when I'm out and about?" Mo Ran replies, and that gets an eye roll out of Chu Wanning. It also gets the corners of his lips to twitch lightly before they settle back in his standard scowl, and the action does not escape Mo Ran's notice.

God, he can't believe it had been Chu Wanning that he had been talking to this whole time — that must have been why Chu Wanning

had been so much nicer at work. Mo Ran had been *encouraging* him. Mo Ran doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"How has your weekend been?" Chu Wanning stiffly asks, the atmosphere awkward.

"Well," Mo Ran starts vaguely, unsure of where to go with this. "Just the same old." *You should tell him.* "How about you?"

Chu Wanning surreptitiously glances at his phone that has remained silent the entire time. Mo Ran attempts to look innocent. Chu Wanning turns back to Mo Ran with a fleeting look of disappointment before clearing his throat. "Just enjoying the good weather. I was debating watching a movie."

"Yeah? Which one?"

Chu Wanning looks like he's mulling this over for a moment, before he parrots back the same movie Weiye's been telling Xia Sini he's looking forward to. Mo Ran wills down a twitch in the corner of his eye, and instead gives Chu Wanning his best dimpled smile.

Tell him.

"Do you want to go see it now?" he blurts out instead, and Chu Wanning blinks.

"What?"

"I don't think the theatre is too far from here," Mo Ran leans back in his chair and gives a half yawn. "I want to check it out too, but I hate going to the movies alone. If you're free, then why not?"

Something complicated crosses Chu Wanning's face, and for a moment Mo Ran gets worried he slipped up. Then Chu Wanning gives a stilted nod, and Mo Ran has to force himself to not grin stupidly at the fact that he'll get to hang out with Chu Wanning.

It's sobered only by the fact that Mo Ran, at one point today, should probably come clean.

Yet for unknown reasons, Mo Ran doesn't tell Chu Wanning the truth.

Perhaps he didn't want to see Chu Wanning disappointed in the fact Mo Ran and Weiye are the same man. While Mo Ran has more charm and appeal in person, he doesn't know if Chu Wanning would like learning that his friend is also someone he butts heads with regularly.

Maybe it's the aftershocks of his higher brain functions shutting down at the sight of Chu Wanning in the cafe. It could also be because at one point Mo Ran realized that as Weiye, he admitted to Xia Sini that he had a crush on a colleague. He had even described his crush and their interactions in enough detail that if Chu Wanning found out who Weiye was, he would immediately clue in to who he was talking about. Mo Ran is faintly glad at least he hadn't been more cavalier with the details of his life, such as giving the name of where he worked.

Or perhaps Mo Ran didn't admit the truth because the time he spent with Chu Wanning had been rather enjoyable. The walk to the theatre had been first filled with awkward silence, before Mo Ran sacrificed his cousin and told Chu Wanning about Xue Meng accidentally falling off the treadmill while trying to impress someone at the gym. It got half a smile out of Chu Wanning, and they were able to start a conversation from there.

Mo Ran covertly bought the tickets online while they walked; the surprised indignant look on Chu Wanning's face when he found out has been committed to memory. The movie was some sort of action thriller that Mo Ran had been eager to watch all year. He doesn't remember a single moment of it, having been too busy sneaking glances at Chu Wanning, who was doing a bad job of sharing the large bag of candy Mo Ran had bought them.

Chu Wanning asked many questions throughout the movie, and not one fleck of annoyance sparked within Mo Ran. He then had been so incredibly immersed in the final action scene he didn't even notice Mo Ran openly staring at him like a creep. Thankfully.

They got dinner after at a small roadside restaurant, and Chu Wanning proved he could eat twice his weight in fish stir-fry as he listened to Mo Ran talk idly about work, gym, and cat-sitting for the Xue family. The conversation itself wasn't remarkable, but Chu Wanning had looked rather invested in what Mo Ran was saying regardless. Mo Ran, for his part, had to take his time, absorbing each moment he got to spend with Chu Wanning. Chu Wanning had even given him a passing compliment about his performance at work lately, something that momentarily stunned Mo Ran.

Mo Ran offered to walk him home after; Chu Wanning's place was only twenty minutes away. Mo Ran filled the walk with inane chatter while Chu Wanning would occasionally cut in with some of the same dry humor Mo Ran had seen with Xia Sini, but never noticed in Chu Wanning. Each time, Mo Ran's chest would do something funny.

Mo Ran had been on the edge the entire time they had been out, but Chu Wanning had not caught on at all. Mo Ran is not sure what combination of bravery and idiocy compelled him to suggest they hang out but he's glad he did, because he doubts he'd have otherwise ever been given the chance. It's not that Mo Ran doesn't think Chu Wanning had the capacity to be polite, if not kind — it was just novel experiencing that side of Chu Wanning without anyone else around them.

Mo Ran knows he's in deep trouble. His heart feels extremely light at the thought that he had something that could feel like a date without much stretch of his imagination, but there's a small voice in the corner of his mind asking him when he plans to tell Chu Wanning. The longer he goes hiding the truth, the more likely it will be that Chu Wanning will be genuinely angry. Yet, all Mo Ran can think about is the way Chu Wanning's face had gone pink with the evening wind by the time they reached his apartment block.

Now he's lying on his couch, staring at the ceiling as a strange mix of giddiness and guilt swirls within him.

It really did feel like a date. Mo Ran wishes with all his heart that it was, and he feels more infatuated than ever. He's surprised that Chu Wanning not only tolerated his presence for so long, but actually seemed like he didn't mind it. Had he wished it, Chu Wanning could have simply walked away from Mo Ran.

But he stayed.

And if Chu Wanning finds out that Mo Ran is also Weiyu and that Mo Ran hid it from him, he will be absolutely enraged. Maybe even embarrassed — hell, Mo Ran feels embarrassed himself. But he also feels like he's stumbled across something precious and entirely out of his league.

Just his luck. A close friend he made under a cloak of anonymity in the vast web of the internet just happens to be both his manager and

his longtime crush. If any idiot would be blessed and cursed with this level of connection, it would be him.

His phone buzzes, and Mo Ran aimlessly picks it up as he wonders what to do. It's Chu Wanning — *Xia Sini*, texting him and asking him where he was. Mo Ran stares at the message for a moment, his brain buffering as the same voice from before tells him *now's your chance to come clean*.

Mo Ran sends off a long, winding apology telling Xia Sini that he had fallen ill with a fever and had to go to his doctor's and that the medicines knocked him out. He tells him when he woke up, he barely knew what day it was and that he's both very sorry and willing to make it up to him.

(He's not quite sure how he'll make it up to Chu Wanning, but Mo Ran's impulsive words have never been the best).

Mo Ran gets a simple 'oh' in return, followed by a 'feel better'. He instantly regrets building on the lie and lets the phone drop on his face as he groans, bemoaning the fact that he's a complete idiot.

He gets another opportunity to come clean a few days later, when he finds himself having to put in overtime to go through a backlog of work with Chu Wanning. It's admittedly his fault — he missed filing a report a month ago, and it's just piled up since then — but surprisingly, instead of chewing off his head, Chu Wanning stays back to help Mo Ran.

Mo Ran wonders how much of it is because Chu Wanning wants to, and how much of it is because before their meeting, Weiyu had been gently encouraging Xia Sini to let some of the kindness he kept inside make itself known. Mo Ran has to shake his head and refocus on his work; they're both sharing a table in one of the tiny meeting rooms, and Chu Wanning has been working diligently. Mo Ran can't afford to slack, not when they're here because of him anyways.

Yet he can't stop thinking about how much he enjoyed talking to Xia Sini precisely because the other reminded him of Chu Wanning, except friendlier and more willing to listen to Mo Ran. Through his

friendship with Xia Sini, he felt what a friendship with Chu Wanning could be like.

The joy he got from helping Xia Sini come out of his shell worked in lieu of what he wished he could coax out of Chu Wanning. But it turns out the two people in his life were tied together after all.

Chu Wanning notices him staring.

"Is everything okay?" he asks, frowning in Mo Ran's direction. Mo Ran knows he should tell the truth now, cut it off at its roots before the lie spreads any further. He opens his mouth, and says, "I missed lunch, so I'm hungry. I was thinking about getting some food."

Chu Wanning looks at him funny, like he doesn't quite believe Mo Ran. Thankfully, Mo Ran actually did miss lunch, and his stomach gurgles loud enough in the silence that Chu Wanning sighs and shuts down his laptop.

"Where do you want to go?" he asks, and they both belatedly realize that Mo Ran hadn't actually issued an invitation. Mo Ran quickly course-corrects, asking Chu Wanning what he's in the mood for.

So instead of telling Chu Wanning the truth, Mo Ran takes him to a bustling market a few blocks away from their building, where they both get roast duck and share a paper cone full of fried shrimp. The area is congested and a few people bump into them, so Mo Ran ends up shielding Chu Wanning from the crowd as they eat, utterly entranced by the way Chu Wanning's ears have gone pink again with the cold.

He should tell Chu Wanning the truth. But then Chu Wanning looks up at Mo Ran as he plucks a piece of shrimp from the cone Mo Ran holds and pops it in his mouth, slender fingers pressing against lips that Mo Ran is dying to taste, and all coherent thought vanishes from Mo Ran's head.

There's always the next time, he faintly thinks to himself.

Except he doesn't tell him next time. Or the time after that.

It's strange that he gets more than one opportunity, yet Mo Ran never manages to seize it. Instead he revels in the new pastime he's being allowed: spending time with Chu Wanning.

They share a lunch under the guise of work; the next day, Mo Ran doesn't even bother, just asks Chu Wanning where he'd like to eat. Chu Wanning also seems to go easier on him during work; once, he gives a vague approximation of a smile at the trio and tells them *good work*, leaving the three of them in a state of disbelief. Shared lunches become a regular thing, and once or twice Chu Wanning will even join him after work at the local bar, drinking agreeably while Mo Ran talks.

They're becoming friends quickly, and it seems like Chu Wanning is able to tolerate Mo Ran more and more. This would be encouraging, if it weren't for the fact Xia Sini is still talking about his crush to Weiyu.

Mo Ran tries to be clever in asking, but Chu Wanning pointedly clams up every time Mo Ran teases him about possibly having a crush on someone. However, Xia Sini is significantly more forthcoming with things like—

I don't think the person I like hates me anymore. How can I be sure?

I got to spend more time with the person I like this week. I wonder if they still think I'm cold.

I think the person I like is noticing me. How do I tell?

They're vague enough that Mo Ran can't tell who Chu Wanning's talking about, because Mo Ran doesn't have constant access to Chu Wanning's schedule to know who else he's been hanging out with. He thinks briefly for a moment that it might be himself, but the thought of the cold Venerable Chu reciprocating Mo Ran's feelings is laughable. Just because he tolerates Mo Ran now doesn't mean anything — Chu Wanning has also started to defrost with many others that approach him. Even towards Xie Fengya from the Tanlang division who, from what Mo Ran has overheard, even managed to drag Chu Wanning out for drinks with the rest of the managers.

...was that why Chu Wanning was nicer to him? If things were going well with his crush, then maybe the joy of that leaked into his other interactions. The thought of that leaves a bitter taste in Mo Ran's mouth and stymies the joy he gets from spending time with Chu Wanning.

But if Mo Ran tells him, Chu Wanning may not only be angry, but he may also connect the dots as to who Mo Ran likes. And if Chu Wanning already has a crush on someone else, it would just be another

thing on the list of reasons for him to be upset at Mo Ran, and possibly never talk to him again.

So Mo Ran keeps his mouth shut.

It's a shame he does, because inevitably, it allows disaster to strike.

It happens in a small conference room when the whole team is working overtime. Shi Mei, Xue Meng and Mo Ran are sitting in a pile of papers while Chu Wanning's directly across from them, tapping away at his computer. He doesn't need to be there, but he's stayed back just in case they need help, despite them telling him to go home.

The deadline is urgent but the work is mind-numbingly boring, and Mo Ran feels his attention flag and drift towards Chu Wanning constantly. He thinks about him, thinks about Xia Sini, thinks about how Weiyu has been texting Xia Sini like nothing's different. He hasn't suggested they meet up again, and he wonders if Chu Wanning is thinking about bringing it up before dismissing it as a silly idea. He doubts Chu Wanning gives their anonymous friendship as much thought as Mo Ran does; after all, he doesn't know they're tied in more ways than one.

Mo Ran bets if he replied to Xia Sini right now, Chu Wanning would carry on like nothing would happen. Since he is so incredibly bored, Mo Ran decides to try. He pulls out his phone and while no one is looking, texts a quick *hey, look at this video* and sends a picture of something stupid Mei Hanxue had sent him, before putting his phone on silent and placing it face down on the table.

He watches as Chu Wanning gives a glance at his buzzing phone beside him, pressing his lips together before he turns his attention back to his laptop. Mo Ran tries not to feel the sting of being ignored — a few moments later, Chu Wanning's gaze snaps back to his phone, and he picks it up. His mouth doesn't move but Mo Ran watches in fascination as Chu Wanning's eyes briefly curve up. He types something out before putting his phone back down, and Mo Ran sees the glow of his own screen from the sides as it lights up with a message.

Mo Ran wishes he could check but he doesn't, nervous about giving himself away. Unfortunately, the decision gets taken out of his hands.

"I'm going to get more coffee," Xue Meng yawns and stretches, getting up. "Does anyone want any?"

"I'm good." Mo Ran waves him off, and Shi Mei and Chu Wanning grunt in agreement. Xue Meng sweeps his phone and wallet off the table, and makes a strange sound.

"Who the hell is Xia Sini?" Xue Meng mutters, and it takes a moment for Mo Ran to register the words. By then it's too late. Chu Wanning already throws a sharp look at Xue Meng, while Shi Mei continues to work, oblivious. Mo Ran prays to any higher power willing to listen that Xue Meng's next words aren't—

"Oh, this is your phone." Xue Meng puts down Mo Ran's phone and moves some papers, finding his own. "You sure you don't want anything?"

He gets silence in return. Oblivious to the layer of frost that suddenly blankets the room, Xue Meng takes his leave. Mo Ran dares to look at Chu Wanning, and sees the man looking back directly at him, his eyes boring a hole into his face.

Chu Wanning does *not* look happy. Mo Ran knows his own face is doing very little to hide his guilt. The atmosphere in the room is tense, and five excruciatingly long minutes pass before Chu Wanning can clearly no longer take it.

He doesn't even announce his departure; Chu Wanning simply starts throwing his things into his bag, his face tinged pink. Shi Mei looks up at him in question, and Chu Wanning says a strangled, "I'm leaving. I'm not feeling well."

"I'll see you out," Mo Ran says, standing up immediately and Chu Wanning doesn't look at him.

"Don't bother," comes the curt reply, but panic has been welling in Mo Ran for the past five minutes and as soon as Chu Wanning storms out of the room, Mo Ran is on his heels.

"Wanning — !" Mo Ran calls out, and Chu Wanning starts to walk faster. There's an elevator opening as someone steps out, and Chu Wanning immediately gets in, undoubtedly hitting the button to close the door as fast as he can. Mo Ran breaks out into a run, sliding in just before the doors can close.

He's met with a Chu Wanning who's so angry his face is red, and his knuckles white from how hard he clenches his hands in fists. Mo Ran does a double take just as the doors shut behind him, and Chu Wanning beats him to the punch.

"Whatever joke you're playing on me ends here," Chu Wanning says, voice strange.

Mo Ran's eyes go wide. "Joke — ?"

"You probably had a good laugh over what an idiot I was, right?" Chu Wanning presses on, and Mo Ran realizes his voice is peculiar because it's trembling. "I— I told you so *much*—"

"No one was laughing at you," Mo Ran starts, but Chu Wanning clearly isn't in the mood to listen. He glares at Mo Ran, his eyes bright under the light of the elevator.

"You *knew*," Chu Wanning's voice shakes the more worked up he gets, and dread builds in Mo Ran. "You knew who I was and you still let me tell you all my secrets! You still let me— I can't believe you— and I told you! I told you about *you*—"

"What are you talking about?" Mo Ran reaches for Chu Wanning's arm, trying to get him to speak properly but Chu Wanning shakes his head. "Told me what?"

"I feel so stupid," Chu Wanning says, the rims of his eyes turning red. Mo Ran's at an utter loss; he expected Chu Wanning to get livid, but he didn't expect him to look this *crushed*.

The elevator dings behind them as they reach the ground floor, and Chu Wanning chokes off his own sentence, quickly wiping at his eyes with his free hand. He closes up all emotion on his face as the doors slide open, and gives Mo Ran a cold look.

"I didn't think you hated me this much, Mo Ran," Chu Wanning says, yanking his elbow out of Mo Ran's grip. He thunders out without a look over his shoulder and Mo Ran remains in the elevator, his brain finally catching up to what happened.

It's only when the dust is settling that Mo Ran realizes what Chu Wanning was talking about.

All of Mo Ran's messages to Chu Wanning get ignored. And he sends many — he sends one heartfelt sorry after another with no reply. Mo Ran tells him that he wasn't making fun of him, that Mo Ran wasn't playing a prank on him, that he genuinely saw them as friends.

Mo Ran feels like a massive asshole. He should have told Chu Wanning from the get-go when he saw him in the cafe; at least then they could play it off for a laugh, and Mo Ran could have used that experience to convince Chu Wanning to hang out with him regularly. There's a hundred things he could have done that didn't include inadvertently stringing Chu Wanning along; he was just too blinded by the fact that he got to spend time with his crush to use any of his common sense.

I talked to you about you. The words ring in Mo Ran's head like a turbulent bell, and he constantly rereads their message history together, heart sinking at the revelation when he rereads all the times Xia Sini had talked about his crush.

Chu Wanning had been talking about Mo Ran the whole time he had been talking about the person that *he* liked. Mo Ran was too much of an idiot to twig on to the fact until after Chu Wanning had stormed off; it feels significantly worse than losing a winning lottery ticket. Mo Ran can't believe that Chu Wanning likes — *had* liked — him and he blew it.

Chu Wanning blocks Weiyu on their messaging app so Mo Ran switches to texting Chu Wanning's regular number, desperate to apologize. He texts an *I'm sorry, I wasn't playing a prank on you. Please let's talk so that I can apologize properly, I was wrong.* That message gets read, but he gets no reply.

Mo Ran has never felt more stupid in his life.

Chu Wanning not only continues to ignore Mo Ran's messages, but he stops showing up to work. Mo Ran tries to not let it get to him; he lasts all of two days before accosting Xue Meng in his office and asking him where their manager has gone.

"Oh," Xue Meng replies, something funny flitting across his face. "He's taking some vacation."

"Why are you saying it like that?" Mo Ran frowns, and Xue Meng tries to act ignorant.

"Like what?" he replies but Mo Ran takes the file he's holding and thwacks him on the head. "Ow— okay, fine, he actually tried to quit."

"What?"

"He wouldn't say why," Xue Meng grimaces. "Dad convinced him to take some vacation instead, but he's worried he'll leave instead of coming back. Why are you making that face?"

Mo Ran ignores Xue Meng, turning on his heel instead, guilt already churning within him like a storm at the thought of being the reason Chu Wanning no longer wanted to show his face.

A few more days pass with Chu Wanning ignoring both Mo Ran's calls and texts. Mo Ran's stomach feels like lead the entire time, and he goes through the motions of his day in a haze, trying to work out how he's going to get Chu Wanning to at least listen to him. He's down *bad* for the man, and his inner voice keeps berating himself regularly for it.

Then one day he's in a private meeting with Xue Zhengyong, one that is really just an excuse for Xue Zhengyong to harangue Mo Ran about his personal life, completely oblivious to Mo Ran's plight. In the midst of Xue Zhengyong's heavy handed hints Mo Ran is due for a proper family dinner at the Xue household again, Mo Ran somehow manages to casually ask about where Chu Wanning's gone.

Xue Zhengyong pauses and gives Mo Ran a funny look, and Mo Ran supposes he wasn't as casual as he could be.

"He's taken some time off," Xue Zhengyong says. Then, more to himself, "That reminds me, I have to make sure that the reservation on Friday is booked at the right place. Where's that airheaded secretary of mine..."

"Are you going somewhere?" Mo Ran asks politely, and Xue Zhengyong waves him off.

"It's for Wanning," Xue Zhengyong says, then clicks his teeth. "The place is French, but the man he's meeting with is so picky. You young people nowadays have very expensive taste, do you know that?"

Mo Ran blinks. Xue Zhengyong says mindlessly, "It'll be a good way for him to get out. He likes to coop himself up too much."

Xue Zhengyong's started to speak in half sentences, the way he does when his mind's already drifted to his next ten tasks. But the fact, as far as Mo Ran can see it, is this: Xue Zhengyong, perennial matchmaker that leaves no stone unturned, has set a reservation for Chu Wanning at the same restaurant where Xue Meng's had to meet many a daughter of a family friend. Mo Ran may admittedly have some clouded judgement in regards to this matter, but he ignores that for now.

A plan starts to formulate rapidly in his head, one that Mo Ran knows he will not bother going over again before executing it. He might even end up looking like a total idiot.

Whatever. Anything for love — specifically, anything for Chu Wanning.

One day and one careful extraction of information from an enthusiastic uncle later, Mo Ran charms his way past the hostess and into the sleek French restaurant where Chu Wanning is supposed to be. He makes sure for the umpteenth time that his tie is set properly and his suit is flawless; despite committing the rather rash act of crashing a date, this is a fancy restaurant, and Mo Ran doesn't want to embarrass Chu Wanning. Any more than he's already going to.

Clarity only dawns on him when he steps out of his cab but by then, it is too late. Mo Ran spots the table where Chu Wanning has been tucked away; predictably, Chu Wanning has shown up early, and is alone. Thankfully, because Mo Ran doesn't know what he would do if the date was already here.

Chu Wanning's studying the wine menu when Mo Ran approaches, and notices belatedly he's got company. So slowly that it seems deliberate, Chu Wanning drags his eyes from the cardstock to Mo Ran in question. The act alone has Mo Ran's breath catching in his throat.

"...Mo Ran?" Chu Wanning's gaze instantly sharpens and before he can say anything, Mo Ran takes the seat beside him.

"Wanning," Mo Ran says, and Chu Wanning balks, probably at the overly familiar address. Knowing he needs to be economical with time,

Mo Ran immediately begins before Chu Wanning can shoo him away. “Look, I’m really sorry for crashing your date, but I have something really important to say and you keep ignoring me.”

Chu Wanning stares at Mo Ran like Mo Ran’s a complete idiot, which is fair. He says nothing so Mo Ran takes it as a cue to go on — but then Chu Wanning’s gaze drifts over his shoulder and he raises his hand. Mo Ran follows the direction of his wave and does a double take when he sees his cousin amble into the restaurant.

“What’s Xue Meng doing here?” Mo Ran says faintly, and Chu Wanning simply replies with a terse glance before raising his hand higher. It’s then Mo Ran realizes the table they’re at is rather large, with three other chairs.

“...Wanning, what are you doing here?” Mo Ran asks quietly, as his cousin gives him a confused look. Suddenly, Mo Ran feels like there is a huge amount of awkwardness hovering above him like a cartoon anvil. Chu Wanning helpfully cuts the rope and sends it crashing down on Mo Ran’s head with his reply.

“Having dinner with one of the directors at Rufeng,” Chu Wanning responds icily, and Mo Ran looks momentarily stunned. He wipes the expression off quickly as Xue Meng reaches their table.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were going to be here,” Xue Meng says, raising an eyebrow at Mo Ran as he takes a seat. “Nangong Si is five minutes out.”

“Your dad thought he should send someone competent to babysit,” Mo Ran says, the cadence of his voice belying the fact that he’s started to sweat literal bullets. Given the calibre of the place, Xue Meng simply rolls his eyes at Mo Ran instead of the usual rude gesture. Xue Meng’s about to say something to Mo Ran when his phone rings, Nangong Si’s name flashing on the screen as he pulls it out. Mo Ran quickly takes advantage of the distraction, turning to Chu Wanning as Xue Meng picks up the call.

“This is not a date?” Mo Ran hisses as Xue Meng starts to rattle off directions to Nangong Si’s driver, and Chu Wanning simply glares at him in return. Mo Ran curses internally, while keeping a smile plastered to his face. It may look a little manic.

Mo Ran may have misstepped a little.

To his credit, Mo Ran does a fantastic job pretending he had meant to be at the business dinner the whole time; Nangong Si and his date are none the wiser as the five of them sit around a table and chat. Mo Ran manages to reign in his frantiness long enough to turn on the charm and maintain it for the rest of the dinner. By the end of it, Chu Wanning is holding his dessert fork like a weapon and glaring daggers, while Mo Ran’s back is covered in cold sweat.

Xue Meng is none the wiser, happily agreeing when Mo Ran suggests he see Nangong Si and his date to their car while he settles up the bill. Chu Wanning is about to leave too, but Mo Ran places a hand on his back, on the nape of his neck — overly familiar, but the desperation that Mo Ran has been trying to tamp down all night is slowly bubbling to the surface.

“Will Senior Chu be kind enough to wait for me?” Mo Ran asks, stiff and overly formal, and Chu Wanning gives him a look that is very much an emphatic *no*.

Yet when Xue Meng shepherds their guests out the door first, Chu Wanning lingers. He doesn’t quite meet Mo Ran’s eyes when Mo Ran settles the bill, nor when Mo Ran quietly guides them out of the restaurant. Xue Meng is chatting with Nangong Si animatedly, both of them standing with their chests puffed out as a cab pulls up beside them, and Mo Ran figures he can steal Chu Wanning away for a little longer. He grabs Chu Wanning by the wrist and tugs him into a tiny alleyway beside the restaurant; it surprises him how easy it is. Chu Wanning answers the question before Mo Ran even asks.

“I just want to get this over with,” Chu Wanning says gloomily as they step into the partial shadow, as if he read Mo Ran’s mind. Mo Ran tries to not make it visible when he swallows down his dread.

“Did you...” Mo Ran bites his lower lip, scratching the back of his neck, hiding the way his pants are sweating. “Did you read my texts?”

“...” Chu Wanning ducks his gaze. It takes everything in Mo Ran for him to not grab his chin and pull Chu Wanning back. He’s been mull-

ing over his words all evening long to no avail so as soon as he sees that Chu Wanning's about to walk away, Mo Ran grabs his elbow.

"I was sincere, you know," Mo Ran blurts out. "I am sincere. I didn't—I wasn't playing a joke on you."

The silent look Chu Wanning gives him tells him that he doesn't believe him, so Mo Ran tries again. "I swear, none of this was a joke. I genuinely liked our friendship."

"Our friendship," Chu Wanning says, narrowing his eyes. "Why didn't you tell me earlier? I felt—I feel stupid."

"I'm sorry," Mo Ran says immediately, and Chu Wanning tugs his arm out of Mo Ran's grasp. Mo Ran doesn't let him go yet though, his fingers sliding down Chu Wanning's forearm and circling around his thin wrist. Chu Wanning stares at the point of contact, before looking up. Mo Ran swallows, trying to gather his wits as he's faced with the full onslaught of Chu Wanning's gaze.

"When I found out it was you, I didn't know how to act because I..." *I was worried you would realize I'm not worth your friendship after you figured out who I was.* "Wanning, realizing you were the person who I was talking to this whole time made me... it made me really happy."

Chu Wanning doesn't respond, but even in the low light of the alley, Mo Ran can see the way a light flush suddenly dusts against his high cheekbones. His eyes have gone slightly wide, like he's not quite sure if Mo Ran's lying to him or not.

"Still, you let me—you let me tell you *that*," Chu Wanning says, the words stilted but indignant.

Mo Ran cuts him off. "I didn't know you were talking about me until after last week."

Chu Wanning truly looks surprised, followed by a look of something that's either rage or embarrassment. Quite potentially both. Mo Ran squeezes his wrist again, just in case Chu Wanning tries to bolt again. "Hey, I didn't say it was a bad thing."

Chu Wanning's entire body freezes at the words, like he's been turned into stone. He opens his mouth, but doesn't say anything—Mo Ran's pretty sure the look on his own face right now screams desperation.

Finally, Chu Wanning speaks.

"You said you liked someone," Chu Wanning says, voice hoarse, raw and underneath it all, quite clearly nervous.

Mo Ran blinks. Before he can stop himself he replies with a blunt, "Yeah, you."

The words are so straightforward they make Mo Ran wince, but they seem to have an effect on Chu Wanning. His narrow shoulders slump as he still looks at Mo Ran with disbelief; despite Mo Ran already knowing otherwise, he feels his own self confidence waver, wondering if Chu Wanning will think he made a mistake.

"I've liked you for a while now, Wanning," Mo Ran says honestly. "Even when we fought, I liked you. I was drawn to Xia Sini because he—because you reminded me of *you*."

Chu Wanning bites his lip, and Mo Ran's gaze immediately drops to the action. The other man turns back, just enough to slump back against the brick wall in the alley. Chu Wanning is too reticent to ever issue anything that would look like an invitation, but this comes close enough. Mo Ran takes a tentative step into his space, just as Chu Wanning speaks.

"What does this mean?" his words are quiet, barely audible, but Mo Ran picks it up regardless.

"Um," Mo Ran says, giving a sheepish look. "It probably means you can't get rid of me?"

Chu Wanning manages to level him with a dry look, despite the fact that he's still blushing furiously. He presses his lips together, so Mo Ran continues.

"I'll kneel for you," he says, making one last plea. "Just forgive me."

Chu Wanning's face is partially obscured by the shadow, partially illuminated by the soft streetlight washing into the alleyway. Still, the way he looks at Mo Ran feels as clear as day. Mo Ran's heart beats in his throat as they stare at each other for a moment and unable to take it any longer, Mo Ran seizes his chance and leans in.

He feels a gasp of surprise against his lips, and Chu Wanning is so rigid for a moment Mo Ran almost pulls back. But the moment is fleeting; Chu Wanning starts to go limp and when Mo Ran wraps an arm around Chu Wanning's waist to keep him steady, he finds that it is very

pliant. Mo Ran has to tether his mind to his body, lest it drift away, utterly entranced by the feeling of Chu Wanning's soft mouth against his.

The taste of wine still lingers and Mo Ran angles himself, trying to drink in the richness. Astoundingly enough, Chu Wanning lets him. Mo Ran cups Chu Wanning's jaw and tentatively, Chu Wanning starts to kiss back, meeting Mo Ran's tongue when it licks his bottom lip—

A piercing sound of a phone ringing cuts through the moment, causing Chu Wanning to jump and almost headbutt Mo Ran. Before Mo Ran can convince him to ignore it, Chu Wanning is already picking it up.

"Hello?" Chu Wanning says, and Mo Ran gets a little bit of pleasure from how his voice cracks.

"*Senior Chu!*" Xue Meng's dulcet voice comes through the phone and right. Mo Ran had forgotten about him completely. "*Have you left already?*"

Chu Wanning looks at Mo Ran in question, and Mo Ran quickly weighs the benefits of giving either a helpless smile or a more seductive look, wondering which one would convince Chu Wanning to hang up on his cousin and pay attention to him again. It turns out that he needs neither.

"I went home," Chu Wanning says blandly. "Sorry, I should have mentioned earlier. I wasn't feeling well."

"*Oh no, are you okay? Should I come by?*" Xue Meng starts, and Chu Wanning clamps a hand over Mo Ran's opening mouth.

"Don't worry," Chu Wanning says. "Get home safe. You did well today."

The compliment is enough to get Xue Meng crowing as Chu Wanning hangs up. Dryly, Mo Ran notes Xue Meng hasn't bothered to contact him to see where he is. The thought immediately vanishes as Chu Wanning rests a tentative hand against his chest, bringing Mo Ran's attention back to more important things.

"Do you mean it?" Chu Wanning says, so seriously it almost makes Mo Ran laugh. It definitely does make him break out into a dimpled smile and instead of replying, Mo Ran simply leans in for another sweet and longing kiss.

What Lies Beneath the Haze

BY PRECIOUS

Chu Wanning lays on the bed's fine silk sheets, splayed out against the smooth surface — posed as if one were to paint him.

He's a mess — flushed and covered in a thin sheen of sweat, gleaming beneath the candles' flickering flame. White stains the inside of his thighs, his stomach and chest, signs of a pleasurable encounter that only ended mere moments ago.

And if he were to shift — just by a bit — he'd feel that same white drip out of his thoroughly used hole, causing him to curl up and grip the sheets in embarrassment.

As much as he wants to hate it, his heart struggles to find a reason to. It has been so long since the beginning, since all of this started, that he barely remembers why he despised being here. Why he hated being among these silk sheets and used in ways that would have once made his skin crawl.

But time erodes memory, slowly but surely, and this is what is happening. His memory is fading, drifting away from him, and it drifts further and further when he tries to reach for it. He wants to remember why he hated it here, and why it evoked such a bad feeling within him from so long ago.

But — *does* he want to remember?

The doors of the chambers open, and pull Chu Wanning from his thoughts. He stores them away for later, keeps them in a small mental chest of important things he wishes to preserve. He then moves himself in a seated position, only trembling slightly when white drips from his hole more freely. His hands find a silk sheet and hold it to his chest — like a maiden attempting to retain her modesty.

It's funny yet useless, as what hasn't already been seen?

Taxian-jun laughs as he nears the foot of the bed, already clean and well-dressed for the day. He's irritatingly handsome in his black robes embellished with red and gold. He looks good and he's aware of it. Standing tall with his broad shoulders and finely built physique. His plush lips curve into a teasing smile, his dark eyes roving over Chu Wanning before he spreads his arms out and wide.

"Like what you see?" he asks, raising a thick brow, laughing when Chu Wanning blushes and turns his head away, mouth tugged down by a frown. "Ah, don't be like that, Wanning, you know you're allowed to look."

"I don't want to," Chu Wanning murmurs, his gaze still cast away. He's only slightly taken by surprise when Taxian-jun's hand suddenly grips his jaw, turning his head back so Chu Wanning can look at him. He's made to look into such eyes dark, almost black but holding a hint of violet most aren't able to see.

To see that small shade of violet would mean getting close to Taxian-jun.

That is not a privilege had by just anyone.

"You don't want to look at me?" Taxian-jun pouts. He looks boyish when he does; it's like looking into the past. It makes Chu Wanning's heart ache a bit. "Wanning, I'm hurt. You don't wish to look upon your handsome lord?"

Chu Wanning doesn't answer but it's funny how he feels his chest... warm. The teasing words and the boastful attitude... reminded him of a youth who had so many dreams — who believed so much in himself and his own talents. Who believed he could help the world if he just had a little more power.

The chest of Chu Wanning's memories shakes — as if they have remembered something important and want him to see it *now*. It would open the floodgates of the memories that eroded, and piece together the broken fragments to remind him of *why* and *what* happened.

But before he has a chance to open them, to pull up the latch that keeps them contained, Taxian-jun's fingers press slightly against the soft flesh under his jaw.

Everything in him goes lax; his vision goes hazy as the vivid thought of unlocking that chest grows dull and then duller, until it is a mere shadow.

Chu Wanning blinks slowly, his eyes focusing on Taxian-jun before his mouth curves into a beautiful smile. He leans into his touch — happiness fluttering in his stomach like blue-winged butterflies. Taxian-jun returns the smile, his hand leaving Chu Wanning's jaw and sliding into his hair, fingers gently scratching at his scalp. It triggers a soft rumbling in Chu Wanning's throat; his tensed muscles relaxing as he sinks deeper and deeper into Taxian-jun's tender caress.

"There's my good boy," Taxian-jun says, his voice a deep rumble but also fond. It washes over Chu Wanning, causing his eyes to close as he presses his head into the scratching fingers. "I almost lost you there, didn't I?"

Lost him?

How can Taxian-jun lose him when he is right here?

"You're so beautiful," Taxian-jun murmurs, with reverence enough to make Chu Wanning's heart flutter. "And you're all mine, aren't you? Pretty little thing... all mine."

"All yours," Chu Wanning echoes, a little dazed, as all of his worries disappear beneath a shroud of mist. "Only yours."

Taxian-jun leans forward, pressing a soft kiss against his forehead. He then trails kisses all over his face; on every inch of his forehead, on the bridge and tip of his nose, on the twin apples of his cheeks and on the bow of his lips.

Chu Wanning laughs softly, eyes closing and lashes fluttering when plush lips kiss them.

It's all so soft and perfect, affection a burning light in Chu Wanning's heart that warms him from the inside out. He knows something was bothering him, knows he was on the verge of discovering something, but he can't remember what it was. And he can't seem to bring himself to care or continue the pursuit.

All he can think and care about is Taxian-jun's careful hands on him, the way he handles Chu Wanning's body and touches him like he's something so delicate he'd break at the barest hint of impact.

I'm not delicate, a part of him tries to say, but it's too far away for him to hear. The words are all muffled and fuzzy and he can't concentrate long enough to figure out what they mean. Not when Taxian-jun is showering him with an abundance of affection that makes his heart sing, that makes it feel two sizes too big — swollen and overwhelmed. So he ignores it and basks in the familiar touches of Taxian-jun's hands and the feather-light press of his lips. He allows himself to be pushed back onto the silk sheets, allows his arms to wrap around Taxian-jun's neck as he's kissed and kissed and *kissed*.

He slowly forgets as those memories are surrendered to the fog.

There's nothing to worry about here.

So why should he need to remember?

Chu Wanning and Taxian-jun's paths crossed on an autumn afternoon, the leaves having changed their colours and the summer's warmth replaced by a slight chill.

It was a day when Chu Wanning was allowed to leave the vicinity of Wubei House, not before receiving a cautious warning from the owner of the house, Huaizui. He pulled Chu Wanning aside with one of his kind smiles, his hand a little too tight around Chu Wanning's wrist as he stood a little too close.

"Be careful, alright?" Huaizui had said, his eyes piercing as they looked at Chu Wanning. "There are many bad people out there. Bad people who'd want to kidnap you and take advantage of a pretty boy like yourself. So if you ever feel unsafe, come right back, okay?"

Chu Wanning nodded, assuring Huaizui he'd do just that in the case of danger. He was used to the warning; Huaizui gave it to him all the

time before he left the house to delve into the busy town streets. In the beginning, it always took a bit more convincing and reassurance, a small smile and a fleeting touch on his arm that never failed to make Huaizui's eyes darken by a bit.

It made Chu Wanning's skin crawl, but it allowed him that small amount of freedom he was given one day a week. Freedom that wasn't unencumbered by the threat of Huaizui's presence, when he offered to escort Chu Wanning around the first few times. He didn't know if he could bear it, especially since he was in Huaizui's sight for all the other days.

He just needed a day to himself, a day away from Huaizui and an escape from his life within the walls of Wubei House.

The town was bustling when Chu Wanning stepped into its streets, moving quickly from the doors of Wubei House where Huaizui watched him. It wasn't until he disappeared into the crowds and felt Huaizui's eyes leave him that his body finally relaxed, his muscles losing the tension they had been holding onto for the past six days. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the smell of his surroundings — sweet from the stalls selling sugary treats, smokey from savoury delicacies and the dirt beneath his feet — before making his way past the shops, browsing but also looking for something in particular. It was a spare part for a creation he had been tinkering with, and he had been desperate for his free day so he could finally start his search. Hopefully, he'd be able to find it today and maybe finish his little invention by the week's end.

It took him close to an hour before he was able to procure the piece that he needed. It was a little expensive — the shop keeper had offered it for lower, his eyes dragging up Chu Wanning's body lavishly — but well worth it as he could now finish that invention of his. With the part in hand, he walked out of the shop and looked towards the sun, noting that he had a few hours before Huaizui expected him back. There wasn't much more that Chu Wanning needed as he retrieved what he had wanted. He wasn't in need of clothing or anything pertaining to his job as that was fully provided for him. But he didn't want to go back to Wubei House, not when he still had so much time left.

So he decided to stroll around.

The stall selling sweet treats had caught his eye so he couldn't resist buying a few of them — a small bag of neatly wrapped milk candies, along with a few pieces of lotus crisp — and leisurely sucked on a milk candy as he continued his walk. It was nice and peaceful, the chatter of the townspeople a comforting white noise as he walked and walked and took in what was being sold.

Robes of fine quality, lip stains of varying shades of reds and pinks, delicious foods that were cooked over an open fire, coaxing those in for a belly warming meal. Books and scrolls that made Chu Wanning stop for a relatively long time, chock-full of information about various subjects and stories that retold history while others spoke of myths and legends. He couldn't resist buying a scroll that dealt with theories of mechanics, and he thanked the old shopkeeper before going on his way.

It was such a brilliant experience — just like on all the other days he was able to roam freely — but it also dampened his soul and spirit because it gave him a taste of a different reality.

A reality where he had... freedom, and didn't have to report back to a place that made him feel so out of place. A reality where after heading into town, he could return to the comforts of his own home with his belly full of the food he bought. Then he'd settle down for the night and either delve into his research or tackle one of the many projects he'd been dreaming of bringing to fruition. But that wasn't what he had and his situation made it feel like he'd never achieve it because... of a debt he had to pay.

Finding a place to sit beneath a large tree by the town's exit, he leaned against the sturdy trunk and looked towards the sky. The sun was starting to set, signaling the nearing end of his time on the outside. It felt like his heart was setting with it and disappearing beyond the horizon, never to be seen until his next free day came to bring it back. He popped another milk candy into his mouth, his gaze wistful before deciding to spend his last hour reading the book he had purchased. With the setting of the sun and the dull thrum of the townspeople's

chatter, he sank into his own world and settled into the peace found there.

Until—

A woman's cry ripped Chu Wanning's attention away from his book, his head lifting up to find what had happened. Only a few feet away from him, a woman had fallen and all that she was carrying was scattered across the ground. No one bothered to help her, only sparing her brief glances before going about their business. Chu Wanning's brow furrowed, annoyance quickly bubbling up in his chest, as he shut his book and quickly went to help the woman. When he neared her, it looked like she was in pain due to her slightly scrunched-up features, and Chu Wanning swooped in to pick up her tools laying on the ground.

The woman's eyes widened and flickered up to look at him, her expression surprised before it softened into something kind.

"Oh thank you so much!" she said appreciatively, slowly standing up from her squat with her basket in hand. "Such a nice young man, you really didn't have to help me."

"Of course, I did," Chu Wanning replied, standing up as well after gathering all her tools. "And no need to thank me, ma'am. It's what was supposed to be done."

"Well aren't you kind?" She smiled warmly. "Not many people these days have a sense of duty like you do." She then laughed and the sound was as warm as her smile, making Chu Wanning feel quite light. "And they say chivalry is dead. I still have to thank you though because you went out of your way to help me. I know you think you shouldn't be thanked but I believe one must reward a kind gesture with a kind word, at least."

Chu Wanning blinked, not knowing what to say to the woman's words. It was true that he didn't think his actions deserved words of gratitude. He wasn't doing it to be thanked or rewarded with praise but because it was the right thing to do. It would have been wrong of him to watch her struggle and be like the rest who did nothing. His body and mind rejected such behaviour and it wasn't how he had been

raised. But he couldn't turn down her *thank you* a second time, as it would have been rude of him to turn down her kindness.

So he accepted it with a nod of his head and seeing her smile in return made him want to smile back.

"I imagine you have better things to do than hold my tools and—" Her eyes then widened as she gasped and Chu Wanning instantly wondered what was wrong. Was she hurt? She was in pain earlier so maybe it had flared up again. He was about to verbalise his concern when she pointed at his chest. "I'm so sorry, your robes have gotten dirt on them! All because of my tools, aiya. If only I had been more careful."

Chu Wanning looked down at his robes and sure enough, there was a streak of dirt against the right fold of his robes. It was stark against the white, a brilliant contrast; he couldn't help but be fascinated. Dirt on his robes was nothing to worry about as the House's washers would take care of the stain. The dirt wasn't immovable and wouldn't permanently damage his robes. What fascinated him was that the woman was so worried about his robes, about the stain her tools caused, that she blamed it on herself.

If only I had been more careful.

How long had it been since Chu Wanning had been faced with such selflessness?

It felt like a shock to his system, to experience an emotion so genuine he didn't know how to react or respond.

"It... it's fine. Really, please don't worry about it," Chu Wanning managed to say after a short moment of silence.

But the woman tsk'd and frowned.

"How could I not be worried about it, though?" she replied before staring at the stain again. "That's nothing that a little bit of soap and warm water can't fix. You'd need to be careful due to how fine the material is."

Chu Wanning blinked. "I... yes, ma'am."

"Good," she said, a hint of relief in her voice. "As I said, I imagine you have better things to do than holding my dirty tools, so give them to me and you can be on your way."

She reached out for them.

Chu Wanning didn't give them to her.

"Oh?" she said, her eyebrows raised.

"Let me carry them for you," he said, causing the woman's eyebrows to rise higher. "You seemed to be in pain earlier and carrying these heavy tools would only serve to exacerbate it. I... wouldn't want you to fall again, so allow me to carry them for you."

"It's really no trouble," the woman responded, smiling once more. "I don't live that far away and my son will be there to collect them from me. I wouldn't want to bother you any further."

"It wouldn't be a bother."

"...Are you sure? You don't have anywhere you're supposed to be?"

Chu Wanning looked towards the sun and saw that it was just about to disappear. The sky was already moving from its soft orange and pink hues to the dark blue that arrived before the pitch-black of night. His time was running out, and he knew that if he were late getting back, Huaizui would send men out to look for him.

But he simply shook his head and told the woman, "I have nowhere that I need to be. So please, let me help you."

"Okay then," the woman replied, her smile softening as they began to walk. "Thank you for helping me once again."

"It's not a problem, ma'am."

The two of them made their way through the now lantern-lit streets and made small conversation as they walked. Talking about himself was something he never liked, but Chu Wanning answered the woman's questions out of politeness — expertly dodging particular questions like "What do you do for a living?" and "Are you from around here?," because revealing those answers would be quite tricky.

They didn't walk for long, a mere five minutes until she turned into a small alleyway with a tiny hut nestled in it. He was led to the front door, and the woman gestured at him to wait before knocking on the door.

"Mo Ran!" she shouted as she knocked on the door again. "I'm back, so come out and help me bring these tools in!" She then turned back to Chu Wanning. "I haven't been able to stop thanking you today. I

don't have much but my son should be making dinner if you'd like to join us."

"There's no need for that," Chu Wanning said, not wanting to intrude on this family's home and dinner. She had had a long day and surely, her son wouldn't have cooked enough to entertain a third person. "You've already been kind enough with your words, you don't have to offer me dinner. I wouldn't want to be—"

"Ma, welcome home!"

The door to the hut opened, and Chu Wanning looked to see who had interrupted him. In the doorway stood a man in his youth, tall and broad and strong judging by the way he looked. He smiled down at his mother, his eyes soft and gentle before they looked right at Chu Wanning. He stared back, feeling his mouth strangely go dry as he stared at the most handsome face he had ever seen. His heart did a slight tremble in his chest, skipping a whole beat as the man then smiled at him, kind but unsure.

"And who is this?"

His voice was deep and smooth, pleasant to the ears.

Chu Wanning unconsciously held the tools closer to his chest, not knowing what to do with himself all of a sudden.

"Where are your manners, Xiao Ran?" The woman scolded. "This is the very kind man who helped your poor old mother when she tripped on the street."

"You tripped?" the man asked, instantly concerned as he moved to check his mother over. "Are you okay? Come inside and sit down—"

"I'm fine," she assured him, fond and a little exasperated. "In a little pain but I'll be okay. Anyway, as I was saying, this fine young man helped me up and also carried my tools for me." She smiled. "You don't get a lot of people like him these days so be nice and show him respect."

The man nodded before doing a slight bow towards Chu Wanning.

"My apologies for my rudeness. Thank you so much for looking after my mother and helping her home."

Chu Wanning hugged the tools closer, uncaring of the new dirt stains that streaked across his robe. He felt his cheeks heat up a little, due to being unused to all of this and feeling quite embarrassed. But

he returned the bow and said softly, "No need to thank me, it was the right thing to do."

"He keeps on saying that, so stubborn," the woman tsk'd but the look she gave him was warm. "I'll be heading inside now because this old lady's back is killing her. Xiao Ran, take the tools from our guest and make sure he doesn't leave before we feed him. He said he has nowhere important to go so surely he can stay." She patted her son on the shoulder and gave Chu Wanning a look — one daring him to run off without dinner — before going into the warmth of their small home.

That left just him and her son outside, sitting in an awkward silence for a moment too long. When the moment began to stretch on, the man reached forward to take the tools at the same time Chu Wanning reached out to hand them over. They then both went still before the man let out an amused laugh as Chu Wanning looked away, his cheeks heating up once again.

"I'll take those," the man said and held his arms out so Chu Wanning could deposit the tools. "Thank you again for your help, and I'm sorry about my mother. She can be quite full on at times."

Chu Wanning gently shook his head, his now empty arms laying awkward at his sides.

"She's... very nice," he said slowly. "I... I didn't really expect her to be... so open. A lot of people are wary of strangers."

The man smiled, the curve of it knowing. "Yeah, she tends to have a lot of hope in the world despite..." His smile faltered before sighed. "Yeah. But I'm happy you were around when she tripped and that you helped her. You seem to be quite nice yourself, Mr...?"

"Chu Wanning. My name is Chu Wanning."

"Chu Wanning." The man sounded out his name — rolling it around his mouth like sweet milk candy. It sounded different in his voice; it sent a shiver down Chu Wanning's spine at how it sounded almost... sinful. And the look he gave him, his dark eyes slowly taking in his frame as if he was indulging in a treat — it made his knees grow weak. "A very pretty name."

"Ah... thank you." Chu Wanning replied, lowering his head as the warmth in his cheeks deepened.

"It's nice to meet you, Chu Wanning."

Lifting his head, Chu Wanning was graced with Mo Ran's smile — as kind as his first one, but also welcoming. The corners of his lips twitched as he nodded and replied:

"It's nice to meet you too."

The night had fully arrived when Chu Wanning started to make his way back to Wubei House. His stomach was filled and warm with a home cooked meal; the food was delicious and well made by Mo Ran himself. He recalled how Mo Ran became flustered under his mother's praises — whose name he learned was Duan Yihan — and weakly told her to stop as he peeked at Chu Wanning, albeit shyly. It was a wonderful evening, the best that Chu Wanning had ever enjoyed, as he experienced something he never truly had — the feeling of a family.

He got to experience what it was like to have something akin to a mother figure — Duan Yihan quickly taking him in as her own as she cared for him. She even told him to stop calling her *ma'am* and to call her *auntie* instead.

"Ma'am makes me feel so old," she had complained with a laugh. "I like auntie better, it makes me feel a little younger."

Chu Wanning had never felt so... genuinely looked after, and a huge part of him didn't want to leave when the dinner was over. He wanted to stay and pretend like this was his life and that he wasn't expected to go back to the high walls of Wubei House. It wasn't made any easier when Duan Yihan pulled him in for a brief but tight hug, and told Chu Wanning that he was free to visit them whenever he liked.

He really, really didn't want to go.

Mo Ran had offered to walk him home, and Chu Wanning almost accepted, wanting to stay in his company a little longer. Being near Mo Ran was similar to being in the soft rays of the sun: comforting yet addictive. It also gave way to an attraction Chu Wanning didn't quite know existed; something very new and made him flustered whenever Mo Ran looked his way with those dark eyes, plush lips curved in a smile whenever their gazes locked. He wanted to — he liked — he felt the need to be close to him, and they had only met each other.

Quite odd, wasn't it?

But he had to decline Mo Ran's offer, because he was already *very* late heading back and knew Huaizui wouldn't take too kindly to him coming back with a stranger. So they had to bid each other goodbye in the entrance of that small alleyway, the lights of Mo Ran's home flickering at the end of it and looking so inviting.

"Be safe on your way home, Chu Wanning."

"I will."

"See you again sometime?"

"...Yes."

Chu Wanning walked away from Mo Ran, feeling the weight of his gaze against his back before he entered into the nighttime crowd. There was the slightest smile on his lips — one that stayed there until he neared the doors of Wubei House and it started to fall.

It was already noisy there; the business was in full swing as music played loudly to entertain their guests who drank their hearts out from within the building. Chu Wanning watched as a group of men approached the house, their faces already alive with lust as they talked about what courtesan they wished to get their hands on tonight. As they walked in, Chu Wanning followed and stopped in the doorway when he saw Huaizui standing at the hallway's entrance.

He looked at Chu Wanning, his expression unreadable, and Chu Wanning returned it, his face void of emotion. It was then Huaizui walked towards him and wrapped his hand around Chu Wanning's wrist, the grip a little too tight.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"I got caught up reading a book that I bought," Chu Wanning answered, raising up the book to show the evidence.

Huaizui hummed and took it from him before flipping through the pages; his brow furrowed at the complex equations in it.

"This is what took up your time, is it?" He closed the book and looked at Chu Wanning once again, his eyes assessing. A moment passed followed by another and yet another, long enough for more clients to make their way inside to find their pleasure on a late autumn night. After one last moment, Huaizui smiled as his eyes relaxed and his grip on Chu Wanning's wrist became loose.

"My pretty little Wanning," he cooed, his other hand coming up to gently caress Chu Wanning's hair. "So smart and reading such hard stuff. It explains why you're always tinkering in your room, huh? Beauty and brains... a lot of men would pay for a treat like you."

Chu Wanning knew that was a lie.

Most men wanted their courtesans beautiful but lacking in intelligence — making it easier for them to use and manipulate.

"Thank you, master," was all Chu Wanning could bring himself to say.

"Of course." Huaizui murmured, staring intently at him before looking down at his robes. "You're filthy. Go and get yourself ready so you can replace the musician in the main hall in the next hour."

"Yes, master."

"Good boy."

Chu Wanning moved away from Huaizui and got as much space between them as possible. Huaizui's eyes were on his back again, similar to when he felt in the morning, an uncomfortable weight settling there as he tried to get away as fast as he could. It was nothing compared to the weight of Mo Ran's gaze, warm and solid as it made Chu Wanning feel *safe*. It provided him with a sense of security he had never known.

The deeper he went into Wubei House, the further away he got from the outside world.

And the further away he got from the comfort of Duan Yihan's laugh and Mo Ran's smile.

As he started to ascend the stairs leading to his room, his heart twisted painfully in his chest.

He should have stayed.

Chu Wanning doesn't know where Taxian-jun goes off to during the day. He often disappears in the morning, tenderly caressing Chu Wanning's cheek as he promises to see him soon. He's still bleary with sleep, peering up at Taxian-jun with hazy eyes as he nuzzles into the warm palm against his skin.

"Rest, my love," Taxian-jun murmurs, planting a kiss against his forehead. "I'll be back to see you in the afternoon."

Chu Wanning hums softly, a pleasant chirp escaping his lips before the hand is gone and he's left to nuzzle into Taxian-jun's side of the sheets.

It's been going on like that for as long as he can remember, and the few times Chu Wanning has tried to ask — "Where do you go off to every day?" — he's only met with a smile and a large hand resting against the curve of his jaw.

"Nowhere you need to worry about," Taxian-jun tells him.

Chu Wanning leaves it at that, despite the slight worry that tightens in his chest each time. If Taxian-jun tells him he doesn't need to worry, then he'll believe him because he has no reason not to. But that doesn't explain the worry he feels and the minor discomfort that accompanies it whenever Taxian-jun leaves with his cape billowing behind him.

He tells himself not to worry, tells himself that everything is fine.

With Taxian-jun gone for the day, Chu Wanning spends his time in his workshop as he tinkers and builds. He draws out his blueprints and makes a list of parts he needs so he can send for them to be bought. He can't go out to buy them himself as Taxian-jun told him not to stress about getting such things.

"We have people for that," he had said. "So there's no need for you to venture outside unless you absolutely have to."

Chu Wanning couldn't dispute that, but found the choice of words Taxian-jun used *odd*. But he didn't question it. He didn't question a lot of what Taxian-jun did or said.

The afternoon rolls around soon, and the doors to his workshop open as Chu Wanning is about to place the finishing touches on his current creation. A machine that is meant to stand guard and watch over the people — to protect them from the harm of those who have ill intent. It was an idea he had for a long time, but never had the space or the resources to make it a reality. When he told Taxian-jun about it one evening after being passionately fucked, Taxian-jun had praised it — smiled as he said it was a spectacular idea that deserved to be made, even better when made by Chu Wanning's hands.

Chu Wanning had grown flustered, hiding his blushing face in Taxian-jun's neck as he politely requested that he keep quiet. But the

praise made his heart flutter and brought him the happiness that came with someone appreciating your ideas and work. No one had ever been excited about what he had to offer, never shown an interest in what he had planned or what he could do. All anyone ever cared about was how he could perform in a room full of clients, all looking at him with hungry eyes as he played for them. To be wholly appreciated for something that didn't require using his wiles — not that he had any — was very satisfying.

It was freeing — to be regarded in such a way.

Strong arms wrap around his waist as he's about to reach for his wielding tool. The touch doesn't surprise him, as he was already aware of Taxian-jun's presence the moment the doors opened. Instead, he leans into it and smiles softly when they give him a firm squeeze.

"I'm working," Chu Wanning says as he gestures towards the wielding tool he was reaching for.

"I know," Taxian-jun hums as he plants a kiss on the curve of Chu Wanning's ear, sending a bout of shivers through him. "But surely you can take some time off to relax with your husband? He's been working so hard all day and is in need of his darling Wanning." His arms slide from around his waist so his hands can settle on his hips. Large and firm. "Would you be so cruel in denying this husband?"

Chu Wanning's breath hitches at the touch, his body responding instantly to both heated touch and words. He quivers when those hands go up his hips and ride the slight curve of his waist to reach his chest — shakes when thumbs gently brush against his nipples. He can't help but arch into it as small sparks of pleasure shoot across his skin and dip into his bloodstream. Even beneath his robes, he can feel the electricity of Taxian-jun's touch and it does so much to make him weak and oh so pilant.

"Can't this husband wait until I'm finished?" Chu Wanning manages to say around a rush of breathlessness. A small moan builds in his throat as Taxian-jun rolls a covered and peaked nipple between his thumb and index finger. "Just a few more minutes and then I'll be... all yours." A faint flush coats his cheeks, warm beneath the surface of his skin as he makes such a promise. It should be nothing to be

embarrassed about, but Chu Wanning has never been used to saying affectionate words like this aloud.

It was Taxian-jun who brought it out of him and coaxed him to believe there was nothing wrong with being open with your emotions. There are still struggles but Chu Wanning finds himself opening up as the days goes by, much different to when he was first with Taxian-jun.

"But I would like to have you now," Taxian-jun growls softly — right in his ear. Chu Wanning has to muffle a whine by biting his lower lip. "I don't have much time until I'm called back so please..." His hands squeeze at his chest before moving down to slip between his thighs. Chu Wanning gasps. "...let me have you."

It's hard for him to resist when Taxian-jun speaks to him like that. Such low and dulcet tones make Chu Wanning's stomach twist with their flickering heat. He whimpers as long fingers grip his jaw and pull his head back for a heavy kiss that leaves him panting. His hand comes up to curl around Taxian-jun's wrist because he *needs* to hold his husband, so he doesn't lose himself too fast.

He's soon turned around and lifted onto his worktable, tools scattered onto the floor by a sweeping hand. Chu Wanning would have complained — "Handle my tools more carefully!" — but he's too busy being kissed within an inch of his life. His robes are hitched up around his waist and his pants taken off by deft fingers. He clings to Taxian-jun when slick fingers stretch him open, muffling his choked moans in the fur lining of his cape and crying out when a familiar thickness — big and throbbing — pushes into him with the roughness that he *loves*.

He's fucked hard and fast across the table; his legs locked tight against Taxian-jun's waist as he tries to quiet down. The attendants are all around and will be able to hear him if he's loud enough, which is never a problem with how hard Taxian-jun takes him. But Taxian-jun never allows him to be quiet. He pulls back to look down at Chu Wanning with eyes so darkened by his lust the violet within them has vanished; one of his hands leaves their bruising grip on his thigh to come and pull his bottom lip free from his teeth.

"None of that." Taxian-jun's hips deliver a harsh thrust that has Chu Wanning's eyes rolling back; his fingers dig into his shoulders. "Let

me hear you. You know how much I love to hear you.” He thrusts in harshly once again, the tip of his cock slamming into Chu Wanning’s prostate. The grin he gives when Chu Wanning finally shouts — it’s beautiful.

Chu Wanning is trembling when they’re done — two orgasms ruthlessly pulled from him while Taxian-jun’s cum fills him and drips out whenever his hole clenches. He catches his breath, his throat a bit tender due to letting his voice run free. Taxian-jun takes care of him, his words sweet as he puts Chu Wanning back together — piece by piece until he’s whole again. He doesn’t take care of the mess between Chu Wanning’s legs, though, and he earns a swat on his shoulders for that.

“I couldn’t help it!” Taxian-jun chuckles, rubbing at his shoulder as he looks down at a glaring Chu Wanning. “I love knowing that you’re leaking with my cum; it makes my day go by a lot smoother— hey!”

Chu Wanning hits him again, his entire face red.

“You’re so shameless, Mo Ran!” He scolds, but finds it hard to remain angry when Taxian-jun smiles at him, so loving and sweet.

There’s also a look in his eyes Chu Wanning can’t really decipher, but it’s one that he recognises.

It’s a look that always appears whenever Chu Wanning calls him *Mo Ran*.

Their time together comes to an end when Taxian-jun pulls him in for a hug, warm and tight, and Chu Wanning returns it as he burrows his face into his chest. They stay like this for a moment before the doors to Chu Wanning’s workshop opens and an attendant politely says:

“My Lord, they have arrived.”

Taxian-jun doesn’t respond, simply holding Chu Wanning even tighter before pulling back ever so slightly. He looks down at him; his hands come up to gently cup Chu Wanning’s face before he leans in to plant a chaste kiss upon his lips.

“I’ll see you at dinner, baobei.”

There’s a kiss against Chu Wanning’s forehead — brief and light — before he’s walking out of the room, the attendant following after him.

Chu Wanning stands there, in the middle of his workshop, suddenly cold and wishing for Taxian-jun’s embrace again. The cold is enough

to make him wrap his arms around himself in an attempt to find some warmth but... it isn’t the same. He tries to focus on his work, and heads towards the welding tool he wanted to use. The flames heating it up have gotten a bit too low so he brings them back up to the right temperature. His eyes focus on the slow-building heat as his mind starts to drift.

His eyes wander towards the doors and he wonders what is happening outside of them. Who has arrived? What has Taxian-jun gone to discuss? Is everything okay? He wouldn’t know because there isn’t much that Taxian-jun tells him about what he does.

He doesn’t... question it.

Something rattles in his mind; something familiar and something keen on being the focus of his thoughts. It hurts Chu Wanning’s head. The pain is enough to make him close his eyes as he lifts a hand upon his head, pressing the tips of his fingers against his right temple.

It hurts.

Why does it hurt?

Huaizui had been reluctant about giving Chu Wanning his free day ever since he came home hours past his curfew. When the next week arrived along with his day, Huaizui pulled him aside — as he always did — and held onto his wrist tightly.

“Remember to be back on time tonight,” Huaizui reminded him. He was smiling but there was a seriousness in his eyes, one Chu Wanning hardly saw when it came to him. “I don’t need you wandering about late at night. There are very, very bad men out there.”

It was a bit hilarious to Chu Wanning how Huaizui said there were very bad men out there, but the first man he met happened to be the nicest one he’d ever come across. Huaizui kept on telling him to be careful and be cautious about those who roam outside — but then why did Chu Wanning feel safer out there than he did in here?

“I’ll be careful, master,” Chu Wanning assured him. “I would also like to apologise again for being out so late past my curfew.” He then lowered his head, a sign of respect and submission. “I promise it will not happen again.”

Huaizui hummed, pleased with the display as he loosened his grip on Chu Wanning's wrist. The tips of his fingers gently caressed the inside of his palm and it took everything Chu Wanning had to not rip his hand away. It was with another message of caution that he left, and Chu Wanning disappeared into the crowd quickly to avoid that horrible weight of Huaizui's watchful eyes.

He went through his usual routine and got everything he needed to get done in just over an hour. He didn't need another spare part but he was in need of more reading materials along with a small box to keep small parts from getting lost in his room. His feet would thank him for the relief from the sudden pain of stepping on a screw. It had happened too many times for him to comfortably admit.

The sun was still high in the sky, which meant he still had more time — but never enough. With a small bag of milk candies in hand, Chu Wanning ambled over to the same tree he sat under the previous week and unrolled a scroll to look through its contents. He couldn't fully concentrate, though, as his eyes kept flickering upwards, in hopes that he'd catch sight of a familiar woman with her kind smile and vibrant laugh. He'd be lying if he said he hadn't come out today with the hopes of seeing her (and Mo Ran) again, but those hopes didn't stay too high. Life had taught him not to keep them too high on the chance he'd end up disappointed.

And that had happened too many times — he had learned his lesson.

But as the sun slowly started to drop and the time when he met Duan Yihan neared, he couldn't help but raise them high. What he experienced last week was something he found himself craving throughout his sealed-up days in Wubei House. He craved the warmth and familiarity and the company of two wonderful souls. Ever since the dinner in that small hut, Chu Wanning realised just how lifeless and dull his regular life was. And it was funny because people often thought that the life of a courtesan was extravagant and filled with excitement — entertaining your guests while living in the chaos of a courtesan house.

To some, it might be an attractive life; Chu Wanning had seen courtesans who lived for the nighttime and blossomed like a flower beneath the wanting eyes of their patrons. But Chu Wanning shied away from it

all; he wasn't born for the spotlight, and there were moments where he thanked his stars he was merely a courtesan by title, not by job.

The skies were turning to their usual hues of oranges and pinks, a signal of the evening approaching and his time of freedom ending. He looked towards the road where Duan Yihan appeared from and hoped — *hoped* that she would suddenly arrive. But after a minute turned into two and then five, Chu Wanning had a feeling she would not be coming. And there went his hopes as they began to plummet; no chance to see a rare glimmering of light before heading back into the darkness and—

“Chu Wanning?”

Chu Wanning blinked, pulled from his thoughts by a familiar voice, deep and smooth and pleasant to the ears. His heart jumped, and his eyes looked for the source of that voice. He didn't have to look too far as Mo Ran seemed to materialise in the same place Chu Wanning had met Duan Yihan. Mo Ran seemed a bit surprised but... happy to see him as he grinned widely. It was a sight to behold: a smile almost as bright as the sun itself, if not more so. He was carrying the tools Duan Yihan had been using, all securely strapped into a large basket that sat upon his broad shoulders, his right hand holding a bundle of spring onions.

He looked all sweaty and dishevelled, and oh... the folds of his robes had parted just a bit to reveal a slick expanse of firm chest...

The tips of Chu Wanning's ears heated up. It took a mighty effort to save face as he regarded Mo Ran with a nod.

“Mo Ran.” Saving face was going to be really difficult if Mo Ran kept smiling at him like *that*.

“It's so good to see you,” Mo Ran said, and it sounded genuine — like he was actually happy to see Chu Wanning. Which was puzzling in its own right, because who would be happy to see *him*? Did Mo Ran not have more exciting people to see? “Ma and I were wondering where you went off to — considering you kind of just vanished. We were starting to think you were a traveller who was passing by.”

“Ah... well,” Chu Wanning started — not knowing how to explain himself. It was hard, seeing as the explanation was that he was a cour-

tesan and the master of the house only allowed him out for one day a week. “My work has me staying inside quite a bit so that’s why one would rarely see me out and about.”

“Is that so?” Mo Ran asked as he set down his tools and, to Chu Wanning’s further surprise, began to sit down next to him. “I hope you don’t mind if I join you?”

No, *not at all*, Chu Wanning’s mind quickly supplied. But Chu Wanning’s outward appearance showcased no such thing; instead he simply nodded and his mind squeaked when Mo Ran sat down next to him. Close enough for Chu Wanning to feel his radiating warmth.

Chu Wanning could feel himself *burn*.

“Do you mind if I ask what you do?” Mo Ran asked, his eyes wide and curious as they met Chu Wanning’s own. Dark, and with a hint of violet that reflected in the sun’s setting rays.

Chu Wanning’s cheeks warmed beneath the attention, a light pink that was luckily hidden by the skies’ pink hues.

“...I work at Wubei House,” he revealed slowly, avoiding Mo Ran’s face as he looked at his scroll. Everyone in town was aware of Wubei House, and knew that it was an establishment of courtesans where men went off to if and when they had the money. If someone said they worked at Wubei House then it was obvious what they did there. Not many people were keen on making company with courtesans, and those who were usually wanted something of the sexual variety. Even though that wasn’t Chu Wanning’s area of expertise, to tell Mo Ran such a truth made him fear that Mo Ran would either look at him in disgust or simply pack up his things and walk away.

But Mo Ran didn’t do either.

Instead, he gently nudged Chu Wanning with a shoulder — his lips curving into a mischievous grin as he wiggled his eyebrows.

“Oh *I see*.”

Heat flared up at the tips of Chu Wanning’s ears as he hissed, “What is that supposed to mean?”

And Mo Ran’s grin widened, showcasing lovely dimples — causing the heat at Chu Wanning’s ears to deepen.

“Exactly what you think it means.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent with Chu Wanning angrily (cutely, in Mo Ran’s own words) explaining what he did at Wubei House (and how it didn’t involve any sexual activity; Chu Wanning couldn’t help but note the slight look of relief on Mo Ran’s face) as Mo Ran laughed, teasing him further. The two of them settled into what could be deemed a comfortable conversation, and it was nice, so far different from what he was normally used to.

Something in his chest started to grow; slowly waiting for its time to blossom.

Chu Wanning’s head has been hurting him since the afternoon, and it has been an odd type of pain, one that refuses to leave him. He tried drinking tea, asking the attendants to bring him a brew that would relieve pain. It didn’t work, but he denied any assistance when the attendant who served him asked.

He makes the attempt to continue his day — he was almost done with his creation and all it needed was a bit of polishing — but the pain continues to disturb him. To the point where standing is an issue and he has to sit down unless he wishes to collapse. It soon reaches a place where it becomes too much, and an attendant flees in order to alert Taxian-jun of the situation.

His vision grows hazy, his body falling limp in the chair he sits in as he tries to get hold of himself. He clings onto whatever he can, fighting against the tremendous pain that threatens to bend him over. His brow furrows in his attempts; his fingers dig into the chair’s wooden arms as the pain mounts and mounts until he’s holding back his whimpers by biting his bottom lip. His teeth pierce through flesh and the taste of copper floods his mouth. The taste is strong enough to pull him from the edge he’s about to fall off of.

But it isn’t enough to hold him as the doors to his workshop burst open and he’s met with the sight of a worried Taxian-jun. Black spots are dotting his vision now. He can barely make out the people who follow his husband. Then he’s suddenly lifted by two strong arms, settled into a familiar and warm embrace as he’s held close.

The last thing he sees before he loses consciousness is Taxian-jun's lips shaping his name, the sound of his voice barely reaching his ears.

"Wanning!"

And he's gone.

Chu Wanning's chest of memories opens and the erosion ceases. Lost pieces come together and connect to show a patchwork of visions long forgotten — squashed down with the intention of never being seen again. They start to fix themselves, slowly giving way to the events of the past and Chu Wanning watches in the seat of his unconsciousness as all and everything unfolds.

He remembers.

A courtesan was who Chu Wanning had been for as long as he could remember.

Wubei House had been his home from when he was a child. It was unknown how he got there — how he came to be. He remembered asking Huaizui when he was younger, capable of freely voicing his thoughts before the dawn of his teenage years. But Huaizui never really answered him, only smiled at him and said:

"The past is in the past. You are here now."

It took a few more times asking the same question for Chu Wanning to realise Huaizui would never tell him more than that. So his origins remained a mystery; never to be touched upon, never to be discovered. It was left at that and in time, Chu Wanning learned to forget about it.

He was a courtesan by name but not by duty; that was quickly established by Huaizui, who refused to let him learn the arts of seduction. Instead he was made to learn the art of music and had been given the guqin to master as soon as he was old enough to understand the strings and their notes. He didn't think much of it, being made to learn something different from the rest of his peers, but it did put a bit of distance between him and them. The other children didn't see him as one of them and thus didn't feel the need to include him in their circle.

That had left him alone and isolated — bullied, even.

They ridiculed him and his looks, saying the reason Huaizui didn't allow him to learn the proper ways of a courtesan was because he

wasn't *sexy* enough. He was too *rigid*. They'd talk meanly behind his back, their voices purposefully loud as their beautiful faces contorted with their sneers and laughter. It had hurt in the beginning. It had hurt deeply, and even prompted him to ask Huaizui in his office one evening why he had stopped him from being a proper courtesan.

Huaizui had taken one long look at him, his eyes trailing up Chu Wanning's form that had grown tall and slender over the past few years. Chu Wanning lowered his head, uneasy at the look he saw in Huaizui's eyes. It was the same look Chu Wanning had seen their patrons get whenever they gazed upon a dancing beauty they craved. He suddenly felt the need to shield himself to protect his already covered modesty.

"I just think you're better suited for entertaining through music," Huaizui told him. "You play it so beautifully; there aren't many who can play like you do." He then leaned back in his chair, his oak desk acting like a barrier between them. "Besides... I believe that someone such as yourself should... save their first time for a more special occasion." His eyes raked over Chu Wanning's form again and it was... lust that was evident within them. Chu Wanning felt himself take a tentative step back. "Instead of throwing it away to some random client, right?"

It made sense. Chu Wanning couldn't argue against it.

He had heard the misfortunes of courtesans losing their virginity to their first client. There were very few who could say they had a pleasurable experience. Most didn't have that luck as they'd be taken by a guest who was focused on themselves — because they believed a courtesan's pleasure didn't matter; all that mattered were the clients, since they were paying for the service. It was, unfortunately, the truth, and there were guests who were so cruel and merciless it made one wonder if they held any regard for human life.

So he continued to grow in this world of hedonism and navigated it without a soul to call a companion. All he had to keep him sane were the inventions he created, the books and scrolls he was able to buy, and that one day where he had freedom — held his autonomy in his own hands. He played the guqin for the courtesans who could sing, avoided the wanting stares men pinned him with — often confused by them because what was there to want about him? — and tried not to

listen to the sounds of loud sex as he walked back to his room once his performance was done.

This was all his life had consisted of until that day — the one day that changed his life.

The day he met Duan Yihan and... Mo Ran.

It brought a burst of colour into his life and gave him hope to live for next week. He couldn't remember a time in his life where he had been so filled with happiness — almost brimming with joy because something so special had been given to him.

His relationship with them grew; Duan Yihan treated him like her own son while Mo Ran treated him like... someone who was worth the world and more.

It started off beneath the large tree as they talked, before blooming like haitang petals in the spring. They started getting closer; Chu Wanning slowly became freer and allowed himself to gradually express open emotion. Mo Ran brought out that side of him, made him want to be a bolder version of himself. But he also made him shy, made his heart shake and his stomach twist whenever he was close or merely in his thoughts. Mo Ran's kindness and his thoughtfulness, his genuine care for the people around him — it made Chu Wanning feel so safe and warm and certain.

He had never fallen in love before — but as Mo Ran looked at him, his dimpled smile warm to match the softness of his eyes... Chu Wanning experienced it for the first time.

But Chu Wanning never expected Mo Ran to return his feelings, or to confess beneath that very tree as Chu Wanning stared up at him, eyes wide in his shock. He had almost cried when it happened, so emotional he didn't know what to do with himself. It was a whole other new feeling to experience: to love and also be loved in return.

He had never been so happy — so genuinely happy.

It had made him embarrassed but he soon eased into it — a loving relationship that often left him in awe at how it was really his. Duan Yihan supported them enthusiastically, clapping with a cheer as she said, "It was only a matter of time!". That had caused Mo Ran to shout,

"Ma, please!" while Chu Wanning hid his blushing face in his hands. But it was all so good and so amazing and so wonderful and *good*.

But even good times couldn't last forever.

Duan Yihan suddenly grew very ill and the medication she needed was too expensive. Mo Ran tried his best to scrounge around for money — working odd jobs for spare change while Chu Wanning saved the allowance he was always given from his days out. They could only afford to buy her one dose, but it was enough to give her a bit of time. She died when Mo Ran was out on the farm, and her body was still there, delicately wrapped in white sheets, when Chu Wanning came to visit them.

"I can't even afford to bury her." Mo Ran said, staring blankly at his mother, his eyes red from unshed tears.

Mo Ran changed after that, and was never the same, didn't have the same joy that used to come so naturally to him. And while his love didn't waver, his view of the world did — especially when the people of the community refused to help him bury his mother and were even on the verge of throwing him out of town. It was like his heart blackened after the death of his mother, and Chu Wanning didn't know what to do.

Until one day, Mo Ran had left — leaving behind not a single trace. The hut he lived in with his mother was empty and his mother's body was gone as well. The only thing he left behind was a small note carved into the wooden door of the hut:

Wait for me.

Chu Wanning gently ran a hand over it; his fingers brushing against the roughly carved letters.

He'd wait — for as long as he'd have to.

His heart could take it; Mo Ran was worth the wait.

It was two years before Mo Ran came back.
Chu Wanning never thought he'd return the way he did.
He remembers.

When Chu Wanning comes to, he's being held against a warm, broad chest and at first, it comforts him. He leans into it, curling up like a satisfied kitten and sinks into the bliss that comes along with it.

Until he remembers who is holding him, and how the memories that showcased who this man really is.

This is when Chu Wanning starts to struggle weakly, his hands coming up to push against that chest because he needs to get away. The arms around him tighten and lips brush against his ear as a soft voice says:

"It's okay, it's okay, baobei. I've got you."

But it doesn't soothe him, only further distresses him as he wants to get away from this man. This man who isn't his Mo Ran and who came back completely different — who committed such heinous acts it makes Chu Wanning want to be sick.

He remembers hearing about the spread of Mo Ran's power, the killings he and his followers committed as he went through the lands. His ascent to power started on the basis of injustice, but escalated quickly, leading to him slaughtering anyone who stood in his way with a crazed look in his eye — like he *enjoyed* it.

He remembers Mo Ran coming back as Taxian-jun: the evil lord everyone feared.

He remembers Mo Ran promising him a better life with the look in his eyes so tender and loving that Chu Wanning almost believed him.

He remembers Mo Ran striking Huaizui down after learning what he had planned for Chu Wanning — his depraved and perverted ideas. He was keeping Chu Wanning's virginity for himself.

Everything that had happened within the past few years comes flooding back and Chu Wanning is appalled — he's shaken by the fact he's been living with this tyrant for so long. A man who used be his Mo Ran but is no longer—

"I'm still your Mo Ran," Taxian-jun assures him, voice gentle as he holds a still-struggling Chu Wanning tightly. "Forgive me, Chu Wanning. But... there are many things you won't understand. I did it for us, for ma and for the people who suffered. I did it so we could be free and together because we were meant to be, right?"

No.

"We were meant to—"

No, no, no—

Chu Wanning feels strong fingers beneath his jaw as they press at the soft skin there.

All the panic suddenly fades into nothingness; his eyes grow hazy and soon he's looking up at a smiling Taxian-jun, his expression dazed.

One blink.

Two blinks.

Three.

Chu Wanning smiles.

Even Unseen Stars Still Burn

BY BEE

Somehow, the light from the Rift makes its way to the garden levels, though the orbital mirrors block the actual Rift from sight. Mo Ran feels it as he drags barrels of soil additives from the various storerooms, like a ghost brushing its fingers against the back of his neck. He doesn't try to shake off the sensation — you either outgrow that impulse fast on Sisheng Peak, or you spend your life twitching and scratching your skin raw — even when he passes down the long hall, out to the main chamber, and feels those ghostly fingers dig into his skin before vanishing. The Rift just likes to let you know it's around, that's all.

“Yeah well, the Rift can go fuck itself,” he mutters as he hoists the current barrel up the stairs to the cauldron settled at the end of a huge, rustling field of soybeans. The glass dome overhead gleams as a mirror adjusts its angle. “With whatever it wants. Just leave me alone.”

He heaves the barrel into place and jams the hookups from the cauldron into the plugs at its base. Counts back from twenty, hears the satisfying double-click that means he got the hookups right on the first try, then steps back as the sour, beery-smelling additives pour into the cauldron.

Nine down, countless hundreds left to go. Mo Ran runs his hand over his sweaty hair — he needs another shave before classes start again, or there's a shitstorm in his future — and clomps down the stairs, back toward Storeroom 96: Soil Additives, Fish Blood Soil Mixes, and Hoes.

He learned a long time ago no one else thinks the door label is funny. Might still have the bruises from when he dared to point out the label in... in less-than-receptive company.

But he's not thinking about that particular kind of company, the same way he's not thinking about the Rift shedding its cancerous light over the entire system. He's thinking about getting the rest of the soil additives in place before the end of his shift, and then he's thinking about the leftover wontons in his fridge unit.

After that? Nothing at all. When his work is done and his wontons are eaten, Mo Ran is going to collapse face-first into his bed and sleep for at least thirteen hours straight. If he's very lucky, he'll wake up in time for his next shift, and he won't be hungover anymore.

You wouldn't be hungover if you hadn't decided to out-drink the delegates from Rufeng Station! Xue Meng shouts, his imagined version loud enough to make Mo Ran swear and cover his ears. *No one asked you to show off! It's your own damn fault you're miserable now!*

"All right, Mengmeng, all right." Mo Ran palms the door lock and slips into the storeroom, breathing in the warm, peaty smell all the storerooms share, regardless of what they're actually storing.

The thing is, just the presence of the Rufeng Station delegation — and doesn't *that* just trip off the tongue — meant someone had to show off. Especially after one of the delegates asked if all the beer on Sisheng Peak was as awful as the *swill* in their drinking bulbs. What was Mo Ran supposed to do? He couldn't fight the guy, even with Xue Meng so red he looked boiled; Uncle would have been upset and Rufeng would have started whining about trade sanctions. Not to mention how Chu Wanning would have reacted, as soon as he got back.

No, Mo Ran's only option was to propose a drinking contest, and then try to get the entire *delegation* as shitfaced as humanly possible. Mission accomplished.

Of course, then he couldn't find his own room, and he woke up with a mouth that tasted like where shit went to die, twenty minutes after his shift in the garden levels started.

Not his best idea. Not his best morning, either. He did get a glance at the *delegation* earlier, on his way to the lift, and they looked twice as awful as he felt, so he's still counting it as a win.

Only idiots would call a hangover this bad a win! yells Xue Meng, before mercifully shutting up.

Mo Ran pulls the next barrel out of its slot and starts to haul it down the hallway, through the soft, green stalks of bamboo lining either side. Some of the upper-quadrant stations have their AIs do the grunt work, but Uncle's a big believer in everyone on Sisheng Peak pulling their own weight. Everyone gets an assignment, and everyone does it. Even if you're the station leader's own beloved nephew, you still work in the garden levels, or on station repairs, or transit quarantine. While also keeping an eye out for Rift incursions trying to eat any ships that pass too close. Or the station itself.

Now Mo Ran shivers. Chu Wanning's first words come to mind, some of the few words he ever shared with Mo Ran that weren't cold, disapproving, or furious. Or all three, because Chu Wanning's efficient like that.

When I tell you, Mo Ran, that mass starvation is the least of the Rift's horrors, I want you to understand how bad it could be, and how important it is we stay vigilant. Always that.

Back then, Mo Ran had been a scrawny kid from one of the oldest, shittiest ships in the lower systems. His bones were pretty much the consistency of gravel thanks to growing up under such low gravity, and he didn't have any of the implants that would let him use Sisheng Peak's systems, let alone talk to the medbay AI that gave him the first booster shots of his life. He'd hung on every one of Chu Wanning's words like they were his own personal life-support unit, and swore he'd always be careful.

Chu Wanning just nodded, and then went back to reading under the haitang tree at the center of the garden levels. Mo Ran had wanted, so badly — to be Chu Wanning, to be like him, or just with him, forever.

He didn't know. He'd barely had the words to be grateful when Uncle got him off that transit flyer and somewhere with enough oxygen. How could he find them now? He just... wanted.

"Yeah, and see where that got me," he says, because down here, there's no one to eavesdrop except the plants, who probably don't care about his muttering. And the local AIs, who probably care even less.

One of the larger AI shells is just visible at the end of the hallway, floating over the rows of soybeans like a huge plastic bag. The shell billows and contorts as the AI moves, in ways that make Mo Ran's eyes hurt on a good day, so he focuses on his feet as he keeps trudging through the bamboo, stifling a yawn every few steps.

At least there's no class today. Mo Ran's pretty sure he'd already be in the medbay if it was, as much for showing up hungover to class as for showing off in front of Rufeng to begin with. Both fall under the vast umbrella of Things Chu Wanning Does Not Like — which seems to overlap perfectly with everything Mo Ran does, says, or thinks.

They're a long way from that morning under the haitang tree, when Mo Ran saw Chu Wanning and felt, ever so briefly, like he'd come home.

The barrel catches on a dip in the tile, like they all do. Mo Ran sighs and gives it a tug. It doesn't move.

"Whatever," he says, locking his left elbow and sending a quick command through his implants to add a little more force to the synthetic muscles. He feels the answering *zing!* up his arm, all the way past his shoulder and into his jaw, and then yanks the barrel out of the dip. "It worked out in the end, right? So what if things with Chu Wanning didn't work out the way I wanted? It's not on me. He's just— he's not—"

A little sore spot in his chest starts to ache. It's always there, the never-healing bruise, but today, spurred by lack of sleep, bad judgment, and three pitchers of — it has to be said — amazingly shitty beer, Mo Ran can't hold back.

"He's just cold. And he doesn't... he doesn't care. Even when I— with my arm..."

He pauses to wipe his sweaty face on his free arm, and keeps hauling.

"Ah, whatever. It's not worth it. Chu Wanning won't care. Why should I? At least Shi Mei was here to—"

At least Shi Mei was here to help me with the damn prosthetic, and getting it working is how the sentence should have ended, if he hadn't seen a flicker of something pale and fast-moving at the corner of his eye. The bamboo nearly hides it, but Mo Ran hasn't forgotten the promise he made under the haitang tree, even if it turned out to not matter at all to the person he made it to.

He does not, does *not*, think about his mother as he lets the barrel fall and dives into the bamboo, clawing his way through thin, damp soil in pursuit of whatever that was.

Too late, he realizes what a horrible idea it is to touch anything coming out of the Rift with his bare skin, but his flesh hand closes around his prey at that moment. Triumphant, and also not dead, he crawls backward out of the bamboo and into the light to see what he caught.

"What the fuck," he says.

The tiniest AI he's ever seen glares up at him through his fingers, if something without eyes or a face can glare. "Are you always so vulgar?" it snaps, in a reedy little kid's voice. "Do you always waste time complaining about— about nonsense, when you should be working?"

"Hey now, let's talk about how I just found you sneaking around in the bamboo, buddy," Mo Ran says, without opening his hand. The AI isn't struggling, but it keeps flashing indignant red and pink. If it wasn't such a smartass, Mo Ran would be totally endeared.

"I wasn't sneaking!"

"Oh yeah? Then what would you call that? Spying on the dumb human?" Mo Ran grins as the red and pink flashes get faster.

"You—! What's there to spy on? Nothing!"

"All right, all right, you weren't spying," Mo Ran agrees, opening his fingers to get a better look. Most of the AIs he's met — and he knows he hasn't met half of the ones on-station, not even half the ones that like to manifest physical shells — are room-sized projections of hard light, or constantly-shifting clouds of non-sapient, microscopic robots. At least he thinks he means non-sapient. He always gets that word mixed up with non-sentient. "Then what were you doing?"

"I was observing. For security purposes only." The AI gives him a lofty, cool look, from its non-face. Such dignity, from something barely the size of Mo Ran's fist. "You just happened to be here."

"Of course. Totally." Fuck it, Mo Ran is totally endeared.

"The garden levels would be among the first targeted by any invader, whether human or originating from the Rift."

"Yep."

"Don't," hisses the AI, its voice pitching upward until it cracks, "patronize me!"

It flares hot, star-white. Heat surges up Mo Ran's arm. He swears, drops the AI, and stumbles back to trip over the barrel. He sprawls flat on his ass, still swearing, and checks his hand for burns.

"I wasn't patronizing you!" Mo Ran protests from the floor. "You didn't have to—"

He stops talking as the AI drifts into view, hovering a meter over his head. It's still tiny, and made of too many shifting layers to see what its actual shape is, but something about the warm golden light it sheds like pollen charms him, even more than its attitude. No, he's not charmed, he's comforted, even if it did just try to set fire to his arm.

"What?" it demands, moving toward the ceiling. Its many layers spin faster, strobing pure white alarm. "If you're just going to mock me, Mo Ran, I'll go!"

"No, no, wait! Come on!" He scrambles up, his hangover now a primal scream of a headache, and nearly trips over the barrel. "I'm sorry, xiao diannao. I'm sorry, okay? Don't go. Also, wait a second, how'd you know who I was?"

The AI's spinning stutters. "I queried the main sysfeed for the station," it says. Still so dignified. Mo Ran fights a smile. "I wanted to know who was assigned to this part of the garden levels. It wasn't hard to find."

Right. Mo Ran isn't going to say he wasn't sure if the little AI had a link to the sysfeed yet. It looks way too young, which he knows isn't a term that applies to AIs in general, but this one is so... cute. Adorable, really.

"Fair enough." He grins as he grabs the handle of the barrel. "Ah, that's not really fair, though, is it?"

"What's not fair," says the AI, warily.

"You know me — but heh, who doesn't? But I don't know you. What do I call you? Unless you like xiao diannao. I could keep calling you that."

More spinning. The layers shade back to warm, flickering gold. "You can call me Xia Sini," it says after a few seconds.

Oh my god, Mo Ran thinks, unable to stop himself from smiling. *I love this little guy. I would die for Xia Sini.*

"Okay," he says. "Xia Sini it is. Wanna keep me company while I finish up? It'd be nice to have someone to talk to. Don't worry, I'm not gonna ask you to help! No offense, but this looks like a bit too much for you. Unless you need to help your programmer?"

"He's busy," Xia Sini say.

"Oh yeah? Making more little—" Mo Ran stops that sentence before it can get him another neural shock, and clears his throat. "Who, uh, who's your programmer? I know most of them, because I'm one of Chu-laoshi's students."

"My programmer..." Xia Sini's shell tightens. If he were a human, he would be hunching his shoulders. "...is Chu-laoshi."

Mo Ran works his jaw. "Huh," he says carefully. It figures. The first time he gets to meet a new AI in years, and it's one of Chu Wanning's. Xia Sini probably already hates him. AIs have their own personalities and preferences, but they tend to mirror their original programmer in a lot of ways. And stay *extremely* loyal to said programmer, especially when it comes to people their programmer doesn't like.

"That's cool for you," he adds, after Xia Sini's stared at him a while. "Well, if you're not busy with stuff for Chu-laoshi, then hang out with me! It'll be fun, I promise. A whole *barrel* of fun, yeah?" He waves at his cargo, winking just to make the joke even cornier.

It feels like Xia Sini gives him another glare, but the AI just floats slightly ahead of Mo Ran, like it's looking out toward the gardens. He tries to follow what it's watching for, but it's just soybeans as far as the

eye can see. No other workers, nothing. The AI he saw earlier is long gone.

Xia Sini floats back to hover at his shoulder. “Okay,” it says.

Mo Ran gives it another grin. Halfway through plugging in the barrel, Mo Ran realizes he hasn’t felt the ghost-touch of the Rift the whole time he’s been talking to Xia Sini. He knows it’s still there, shining and hungry, but he doesn’t notice it.

There are eleven distinct feeds being streamed to Chu Wanning’s main monitor. He is only paying attention to one: a still image of Mo Ran’s smiling face, eyes bright with exertion, expression open in a way it never is when he looks at Chu Wanning.

He’s been staring at it long enough for five of the ignored feeds to start pinging him for commands, or, in the case of the topmost-right feed, for some signal that he’s still alive and hasn’t succumbed to any of the Rift’s myriad effects. So: Chu Wanning presses the pad of his thumb against the waiting sensor until he feels the needle pierce his skin — exactly where it always does, bruises upon bruises — and take the singular drop of blood it needs to *determine his disposition*, according to the stupidly alliterative protocol.

His shuttle is far enough from the station to add a ten-second delay to any communications, which means he has a full twenty seconds to wait for his results. He knows he’s uncompromised — one doesn’t spend as much time as he does staring at the Rift without knowing an incursion’s symptoms — but there are protocols that can be ignored, and ones that can’t.

Chu Wanning spends those twenty seconds with his head in his hands. Hearing Mo Ran’s voice, over and over, damning him.

He’s just cold. And he doesn’t... he doesn’t care.

Mo Ran is half-right, Chu Wanning supposes. The truth of his coldness is all the evidence anyone needs to believe the lie that he doesn’t care. But he does care — or he wants to, keeps making awkward, hesitant attempts to prove it, only for his own bad temper and poisonous tongue to undermine him. Every time, without fail.

He looks up when twenty-two seconds have passed and no results have yet arrived. A ship may have temporarily blocked the signal, but he memorized all the flight routes and few ships would deviate from their registered paths. They all know the risks — of the Rift, and Chu Wanning’s temper.

There’s still time before he has to worry. He puts his head back in his hands, but not before looking one last time at the image of Mo Ran. Handsome, bright, smiling Mo Ran, one dimple visible and his eyes flashing violet in the warm garden level lights. So young, so beautiful, so good. Even on a screen he looks twice as alive as Chu Wanning does in person.

He’s only wearing the thin sleeveless tunic the students favor, and the harsh line where the prosthetic arm meets his shoulder is clearly visible. Chu Wanning feels his heart clench, though there’s no sign of rejection or redness in the image. He worked hard to ensure that would be the case, while Mo Ran healed in a cryo-tank in the medbay. The incursion had been devastating, but when weren’t they? The station was lucky so few were compromised; the shriveled corpses of ships that were not so fortunate still drift through the system, waiting to be caught in the sun’s gravity well.

But that incursion had been devastating because Mo Ran had been at risk, because Mo Ran had nearly been taken — never mind that Mo Ran was only hurt because he disobeyed Chu Wanning’s orders to retreat, and charged into the mass of rippling, iron-teethed forms clawing their way through the hull.

The joy Chu Wanning felt, when Mo Ran was found alive in the wreckage, was all-consuming. Almost pathetic in its depth. The fury that came after... was shameful. He shouted at Mo Ran, insulted him, promised to break both his legs for disobeying — and in return, something in Mo Ran was closed to him, forever.

Nothing less than what he deserved. When the prosthetic was ready, he installed it, and told Shi Mei to take the credit. It wouldn’t have been accepted otherwise. And if he wished the smile Mo Ran gave Shi Mei had been for him, that was his secret.

Chu Wanning has so many of those. The Xia Sini AI shell is one of them: a way to split his consciousness via quantum entanglement and avoid the time delay completely while he works out at the Rift's barrier. He thought it would be easier to hide, but Mo Ran surprised him, as so often happens. While he should have revealed the truth as soon as Mo Ran spoke to him, Mo Ran had been so *happy* to talk to Xia Sini that Chu Wanning couldn't resist lingering.

Just this once, he tells himself. *It can't happen again*. He can't be weak.

A subvocal command unfreezes the Xia Sini feed. Mo Ran is still at work in the garden level, humming to himself as he passes through the flowering trees at the far end. Chu Wanning starts to close the feed, but then Mo Ran gently brushes his hand against the haitang tree Chu Wanning himself favors.

The movement is so quick and casual Chu Wanning could deny he saw anything, but — he saw it. Mo Ran, lingering a moment under the tree where they first met, touching it with the arm Chu Wanning built for him in three silent, terrified days.

"It doesn't mean anything," he says, through numb lips. His traitor heart whispers, *But what if?*

Before he can answer, the sensor pings. All clear.

Chu Wanning shakes himself. Enough of this pointless longing; Mo Ran would sooner love what the Rift vomits out than him. He shuts off all but the most critical feeds, and programs the shuttle for the jump to the next barrier engine.

The reflection in the nearly-blank monitor is a gaunt, steel-eyed man, too thin and angular to even be called striking. Chu Wanning stares at him as the engine spins up, gnawing at the inside of his cheek until it bleeds.

He tells himself he won't activate the Xia Sini feed again. Six hours later, he does, but Mo Ran is long gone, and the garden levels are empty.

"You don't think something's wrong, do you?"

Mo Ran ignores Xue Meng and shoves the barrel into place, almost groaning with relief when he hears the click of the hookups.

"You dumbass, talk to me! Why would laoshi stay away so long?"

Why would I fucking care, is what Mo Ran wants to say, because he's on hour four of a three-hour shift, all thanks to Xue Meng's constant badgering. What he forces himself to say instead is, "I don't know, Mengmeng, he doesn't clear his plans with me before he goes somewhere. Maybe message him yourself to find out?"

"I — !" Xue Meng's face twists in shock. If Mo Ran weren't so tired, he'd start laughing. "Like I'd bother laoshi when he's working! And you'd better not be, either! He's got better things to do than listen to your garbage!"

That's a sharp conversational turn, even by Xue Meng's standards. Mo Ran shrugs. "Okay, then maybe it's all those better things that have him delayed. Ask Uncle, he probably knows."

"I already did." Xue Meng drapes himself across the stair railing, brow furrowed so hard Mo Ran can almost hear the skin crinkling. "Chu-laoshi just said he was delayed. Nothing else."

Even for Chu Wanning that's light on details, especially since Xue Zhengyong is one of the few people on the station he actually makes an effort for. Mo Ran feels a reluctant concern take root in his gut — reluctant and unwelcome, because Chu Wanning's more than capable of handling himself, and because... Chu Wanning wouldn't exactly welcome that concern, either.

He surprises himself by asking, with real investment in the answer, "He's still checking in, right?"

Xue Meng nods, frown still in place. "All clear, but...it's been three extra days. Out on the Rift, that's—"

"Look," Mo Ran interrupts. "Laoshi's fine. What's the Rift gonna throw at him that he can't handle?" The seam at his shoulder throbs, an old, remembered pain; for a brief moment Mo Ran is back under the wreckage, gasping as he hears his air leak away, wondering when he stopped feeling his left arm. "He's fine," he adds, with emphasis, though whether that's for Xue Meng or for himself, he's not sure. And not interested in analyzing.

Predictably, Xue Meng explodes. "That's our laoshi you're talking about, idiot! How can you not care? What if something's happened to

him? He wouldn't tell us, he wouldn't want us to worry! Haven't you gotten that through your thick head?"

"Okay, then why are we worrying, if that's not what he wants?" It's like there's a blister inside his chest, waiting to burst; Mo Ran can't put a name to half of what he feels about Chu Wanning on a good day but now it's just a boiling-hot mix of emotion, eating away at him like acid. What he *does* know he feels is that the thought of something happening to Chu Wanning terrifies him — but not why.

"You — !"

Xue Meng's tirade is interrupted by a tiny *pop!*, accompanied by a flash of light. A familiar gold shape flowers into existence just overhead, the meshed vines circling around and through a central blossom.

Delight replaces the rancid emotional froth in Mo Ran's head. "Xia Sini!" he yells. "You're back!"

"Hello," says the AI, placidly and quietly, so quietly Xue Meng's noise of surprise almost swallows up their voice.

"Wait, when did you meet Xia Sini? You haven't been bothering him, have you?"

"No!" says Mo Ran, without thinking. He glances over at Xia Sini, a little guilty — he didn't give the little guy a chance to answer, but Xia Sini doesn't seem to disagree. "And I uh— we met yesterday, when I was on my shift. We had fun hanging out, right, Xia Sini?"

"Mn." Xia Sini drifts over to the cauldron, shedding pollen as he goes. "You didn't turn this on, Mo Ran."

"Oh sh— thanks for that." Mo Ran finishes programming the sequence and steps back, beaming at what he hopes is Xia Sini's face. "What about you, Xue Meng? When'd you guys meet?"

"Two weeks ago," Xue Meng replies, puffing up with satisfaction that he made friends with the AI first. Because everything's a competition. Mo Ran doesn't bother to hide his eyeroll. "Right after Chu-laoshi left. How are you, Xia Sini? This idiot hasn't been bothering you, has he?"

Right, because Mo Ran's a threat to an AI that can make you think your nerves are melting *and* on fire. Cue eyeroll two of the day.

"No," says Xia Sini. He's strangely emphatic about it. "Mo Ran doesn't bother me. He's... nice."

Mo Ran beams. "See? I'm nice, Xue Meng!"

"Whatever! That doesn't mean he likes you. You don't *have* to put up with him, Xia Sini. He doesn't get better, I promise!"

"I like Mo Ran." Xia Sini's shell shrinks in on itself, the golden light mottling with what looks like bruises briefly before clearing and expanding. "And I like it here."

I win, Mo Ran mouths at Xue Meng, who mouths something truly obscene and insulting back.

"Well, if you want to deal with him, I can't stop you, Xia Sini," Xue Meng says, with a half-smile that takes most of the sting out of his words. "But if you want some *real* company, I've got my shift up on the transit level. I promise I won't be anything like this idiot!"

"Yeah yeah, get going, Mengmeng. Go wave some fancy lights around to entertain the shuttle pilots."

"You know that's not what I do! Shut up!"

Mo Ran's laughter chases Xue Meng out of the garden levels, leaving him alone with Xia Sini. "Just you and me now, little guy," he says, with a wink.

He expects a *Don't call me that*, or maybe even another shock, but Xia Sini just says, "Mn," and floats alongside him as he heads out for another barrel.

It's easy to be Xia Sini, in a way being himself isn't. Chu Wanning can manifest Xia Sini's shell any time he wants in proximity to his students, and they'll all greet him with smiles and real warmth. From the beginning, it's clear they *want* him around, in a way they never wanted Chu Wanning.

So he stays out at the barrier, circling through the engines like he has actual repairs to make, giving excuse after excuse to Xue Zhengyong whenever the station leader presses him about his return, just for a chance to *be* Xia Sini a little longer. He doesn't eat much, so the rations on board his shuttle will last for at least another month. Two, if he's very strict about his consumption.

Even a week as Xia Sini seems like an unspeakable luxury. Not just from the ease of acceptance, the knowledge of being wanted, but from

being able to say exactly what he thinks, and not be laughed at or feared. Well — sometimes Mo Ran laughs at him, but in a way that lets Xia Sini be in on the joke. Chu Wanning would tolerate *being* the joke just for the chance to have Mo Ran smile at him, warm and open, and say *What do you think, Xia Sini?* Like his answer actually mattered to Mo Ran. Like it had weight, and worth.

He presses his thumb to the sensor. A small sting, then the wait for the results. Over and over, every hour, for days on end. Both his thumbs are pocked with sore, red marks, along with the rest of his fingers. It hurts to work the controls, even though they all operate on haptic feedback and require no actual contact, but he keeps doing it, stretching out the hours he can be someone other people are glad to know. Buying that luxury, one hour, one drop of blood at a time.

All clear.

Because Chu Wanning is, at his heart, a weak, lewd old man, he activates the Xia Sini feed even though he knows it's the night cycle back on Sisheng Peak. He's even tempted to manifest the shell outside Mo Ran's door, but he steels himself, and manifests instead on the garden level where Mo Ran works, every morning.

If he were two levels up in this section, he could hear water being cycled through the pools in the fish hatchery, but here it's almost silent, save for fresh air coming through the hidden vents in the ceiling. A few leaves rustle, but nothing truly stirs or moves. He can float through the orderly rows, scan the bulkheads for signs of structural weakness, check the storerooms to make sure the barrels of soil additives are ready for Mo Ran's arrival. He could do little to help, in this form, if they weren't, but he wants so badly to be of use he can't stop himself. Anything, anything at all, to pay back what he's so selfishly taken.

"Xia Sini?"

He twists the shell around so abruptly his actual, human body grows nauseous, thinking *This is how I'm found out* — because what real AI can be taken off-guard like this? — but Mo Ran, rubbing sleepily at one eye, just smiles at him from under mussed hair.

"And here I was, thinking I'd get a headstart on the day and impress everyone." He ambles forward, yawning, and palms the lock on the

storeroom door. "But you're here ahead of me. Should've figured I couldn't beat an AI, right?"

"Mn." Chu Wanning drifts into the room in Mo Ran's wake, puzzled. Mo Ran loves his sleep — more than his coursework or training, it has to be said — so why is he here, in the valley of the night cycle?

He's saved from having to ask; Mo Ran is already talking, his voice rough from sleep. It makes gooseflesh prickle over Chu Wanning's body, and floods him with warmth. Never, not once, has he heard Mo Ran like this. He never wants to stop.

"I couldn't sleep." Mo Ran works his way down the line of barrels, checking the readout on each one between yawns. "Ah, well, no, it's more like I could, but I didn't want to. It gets like that, sometimes — I'm tired, but I know it'll be a bad night, so I don't."

"A bad night?" Chu Wanning prompts. He regrets working so long and so hard on ensuring the entanglement courier system would have such an excellent visual projection; Mo Ran looks real enough to touch, smell, taste.

Shame burns through him at the thought — his student, his own *student*, a young man who doesn't deserve to be the object of Chu Wanning's desire, let alone this... this spying — but he can't stop himself. He'll find a way to pay it all back, somehow, someday.

Mo Ran sighs. "Yeah. It's... okay, you know my arm?"

Yes, Chu Wanning does know Mo Ran's arm. Like his own, one might say. He grips his wrist and presses his thumb into the pulse right below his palm. Rabbit, hummingbird quick.

"It looks great now, but I... I uh, lost the real one a few years ago. An incursion — you know what those are, right? Never mind, I'm stupid. Anyway, there was an incursion, and I was trying to get people out of a compromised sector when one of those, you know, those things, came in through the hull and collapsed it on top of me. They got me out, but it was two days later.

"I'm fine now," Mo Ran says brightly. "Better than fine. I mean, have you seen this arm? No way I'd lift these barrels without it! My friend, Shi Mei, he designed it. Got me all set up and onto a whole integration therapy program. But I still have nightmares," he adds, like he's rushing

past the worst part of the story for Xia Sini's sake. "So sometimes it's better not to sleep. When that happens, I just come down here and get to work. I'm tired all day, and let me tell you, Chu-laoshi, he gets real mad when that happens but... sometimes it's better not to sleep. That's all. So here I am."

What can Chu Wanning possibly say to that, without giving himself away? He already gave up on any claim to the arm or its benefits; now he wonders if there is any comfort he can give without Mo Ran immediately detecting the lie.

"Here you are." It sounds inane to his own ears.

But Mo Ran smiles and retrieves the first barrel, not minding in the least, and not judging Xia Sini at all. "Yep," he says. "Here and ready to work. So it's not that bad, right?"

"Right," Chu Wanning echoes. Still inane.

"Can I tell you something, though?"

Through Xia Sini's visual feed, Mo Ran looks more than tired. He looks pale and wrung-out, and strangely old. Chu Wanning realizes this is what Mo Ran will look like forty, fifty years down the line, and slams his heart closed against the idea. He has no right to such a glimpse, less than he does to Mo Ran's confidence or even to Mo Ran's company. Mo Ran isn't his. These stolen moments are already more than he hoped for.

He should say no, or change the subject. Contrive some interruption and escape without hearing this secret. Mo Ran is talking to a lie. It isn't right.

...but he says, "Mn," and darts closer, into Mo Ran's reach.

"Thanks," Mo Ran says, almost sheepish. "It's just... I know Shi Mei worked so hard on it—" A wave at the arm; Chu Wanning's stomach won't stop hurting. "—but sometimes, when he works on it, it hurts more than before he did. I'm not complaining! It's probably something I'm doing wrong. But it hurts a lot, and I don't want to tell him and make him upset."

Even if Chu Wanning knew what to say, he wouldn't be able to speak. He just watches Mo Ran rub the back of his neck, then the scar tissue

where Chu Wanning carefully stitched the prosthetic into his body. Mo Ran looks up with a grin, then huffs a laugh.

"Thanks, Xia Sini. It's good to talk to you, you know? My little buddy."

"I'm not little," Chu Wanning says on reflex, then flushes in mortification and anxiety. Surely that sharp reply gave him away — he sounded too much like himself, not pleasant, quiet Xia Sini.

But Mo Ran just keeps smiling, eyes curved and white teeth gleaming.

"All right, if you say so. If you say so, Xia Sini. Ah, time to get moving. Maybe I'll finish early today — what do you say?"

Chu Wanning shuts his eyes, and Xia Sini's. He hears Mo Ran's footsteps moving away, and Mo Ran's pleasant, tuneless humming, but doesn't follow. That day is too clear in his mind, the memories inescapable. He's relived them too many times to count — the digging through tainted rubble, swallowing mouthfuls of blood as the incursion remnants tried to infect him.

He'd been so afraid all he would find under the broken hull would be what remained of Mo Ran's corpse, so afraid he felt nothing else until he pulled off his armor and skinsuit, and saw the bloody rents in his own skin. But he killed every last remnant. He found Mo Ran. The rest... the rest is worth it.

"Xia Sini?" Mo Ran stands at the end of the hall, head cocked to the side. "You coming? Lots of plants to feed!"

Chu Wanning shuts off the feed, bile in his throat and no air in his lungs. He jams his thumb onto the sensor, again and again and again, until his mind is a wash of grey static and he feels only that tiny, bright soreness.

Never again, he decides. He can never pay this back, no matter how hard he tries.

He lasts almost twenty hours this time. Mo Ran is just as happy to see Xia Sini as he always is, but the hurt in his eyes is obvious. He doesn't ask, and Chu Wanning doesn't reply. They move through the gardens in silence, helping the plants grow.

Xue Meng paces the classroom, which isn't big enough for more than five strides in any direction, so he can't really work up the furious energy he wants to — but he's funny to watch, and Mo Ran needs a good laugh today. His arm *hurts*, like it's about to pull away from his shoulder, and in spite of Shi Mei's gentle reminders to leave it be, he keeps rubbing at the seam, trying to soothe away the ache.

"Can't you just take a look at it?" he whines, while Xue Meng keeps circling like the universe's most obnoxious security drone in the background. "Just a quick look, Shi Mei, it hurts so bad."

"A-Ran," Shi Mei says, with the sort of helpless laugh that punctuates every other sentence he speaks, "it's not really that bad, is it? Maybe you could get some painkillers from Madam Wang, and see if that helps. I don't know how much I could do for it, if it's just hurting."

"I already *did*. Ask Auntie Wang, that is. She said I should ask you." Mo Ran drapes himself over his desk and gives Shi Mei his best imploring look. Xue Meng's pacing has reached a measurable percentage of *c*, and he's now muttering, too. Oblivious to Mo Ran's suffering, because he's a terrible cousin. The absolute *worst*. "Please, Shi Mei? I'll make you dinner."

"Well," says Shi Mei, which is as good as a victory in Mo Ran's opinion, but Xue Meng explodes before Mo Ran can press his advantage.

"It's been forty-six days!" he yells, whirling to face them with fists raised. Mo Ran covers his face with his non-agonized hand and pretends to go to sleep. They can *count*, it's not like they don't *know*. "Forty-six days, and no one's worried! When's laoshi coming back? When's someone going to ask if he's okay?"

"Xue Ziming." Shi Mei pats the air, smiling reassuringly. "He's checked in every hour, and his signs are clear. Chu-laoshi is fine, he's just busy at the barrier."

"Exactly!" Xue Meng jabs a finger toward the ceiling. "No one's supposed to be at the barrier for more than twenty consecutive days! Laoshi himself set that limit!"

"So? Doesn't that mean he's the one who can break it?" Mo Ran peers at Xue Meng through his fingers. Fuck, his arm hurts. His vision wob-

bles so badly he can't focus on Xue Meng's face. Maybe that's a surprise benefit, actually, aside from the pain. "Laoshi knows best. Better than anyone. Right, Shi Mei?"

The expected agreement doesn't come. Shi Mei bites his thumbnail — three years ago, Mo Ran would have dreamed of rescuing that thumb for a week straight, but he knows better now — and sighs. "Maybe Xue Ziming's right, A-Ran. Maybe we should be worried."

"Instead of telling us he's fine, when he might not be!" Xue Meng snarls, telltale red in his eyes.

"Hey!" Mo Ran stands up, wavering a little when his vision doubles. He rubs at the seam without thinking, barely hearing Shi Mei's protests. "Stop acting like I want laoshi to be in trouble! All I'm saying is that he knows best, okay? If he's still saying he's fine, and the records match, let him be!"

"You just like it when he's not around because you get to slack off," Xue Meng snaps, turning to the viewscreen at the head of the room.

A distant ship darts across the void, bright white against a black so deep Mo Ran used to think he could reach out and scoop up handfuls of it. At the far left of the screen, he can just see the rotted light of the Rift's corona. His stomach churns, not just from pain this time, and he looks away, to the back of Xue Meng's head.

"Maybe it's because I like not being told I'm a failure all the time," he says, before he can think twice. "It's nice to get a break."

"He told you that *once*!" Xue Meng screams, whirling around with actual hate in his eyes. "Once! And only after you didn't listen to him and nearly died! He was angry but — but that's it! He didn't mean it!"

"It sure sounded like he did," Mo Ran snaps, pushing forward into Xue Meng's space. This is a mistake; he's only this mad because his arm won't stop hurting and because, deep down, he's beginning to be afraid, too. He doesn't know how he feels about Chu Wanning, but that doesn't mean he wants anything bad to happen. Chu Wanning deserves to be fine, and healthy, and safe, and... and far away from Mo Ran. It's for the best, for both of them.

"He's awkward," says Xue Meng, standing his ground but not meeting Mo Ran's eyes.

“He doesn’t *care*.” Mo Ran doesn’t speak so much as hiss the words into Xue Meng’s face. “Maybe he does about you, but me? Deficient. That’s what he said, after I nearly *died* trying to do the right thing.”

You must be beyond saving, Mo Ran, Chu Wanning had said, eyes so cold they made absolute zero look like planetside summer. *What made you so deficient, so beyond fixing?*

Some wounds never heal. He got a new arm but the hole in his chest stayed open, not even scar tissue to mask it. A slow bleed, right at the center of his soul.

“He can come back or not.” Mo Ran turns toward the door. “I don’t care either.”

His vision clears as he goes, leaving him perfectly able to see Xia Sini’s golden shape dim to grey ash, and vanish without a sound.

Chu Wanning peels himself out of the pilot’s seat and walks stiffly back to the narrow cot at the back of the shuttle. He sits down on the edge of it and waits to feel something beyond the great numbness spreading through his body.

Waits. And waits.

None of this is new information, and most of it is true. He *is* awkward, and cold; he did say those things to Mo Ran, as his student lay in the medbay and tried to explain why he risked himself so. Of course he hadn’t meant them, of course he’d spoken from fear, but that hardly matters now. It hadn’t mattered then. They were spoken. That’s all.

His hands are shaking. A single tear falls on a knuckle and rolls away. He lies down. The shuttle lights dim in response to what its simple VI thinks is him entering the night cycle, but he doesn’t sleep. Whenever the sensor pings for the check-in, he stands, stings his thumb, and lies down again. Stares into the dark. Feels nothing but cold, thinks of nothing but silence.

Forty-seven hours later, he arrives at Sisheng Peak. His shuttle is quarantined, scanned, and cleared for entry thirty-six hours after that. Twenty minutes after *that*, he’s in Xue Zhengyong’s private meeting room, staring at a cup of tea he won’t drink.

“Yuheng,” says the station leader. “You gave us quite a scare, being so long and then coming back when you did! Meng’er’s beside himself — don’t be too shocked if he doesn’t leave you alone for the next little while, ha! Poor boy’s been worried sick.”

“I told you I was fine, and reported in,” Chu Wanning says. “There was no cause for worry. Xue Ziming’s time would have been better spent on his studies.”

“Ah, don’t fault him for caring about his laoshi! He’s a good boy — and Ran’er too, and Shi Mei. They’ve all been worried.”

He doesn’t care.

Chu Wanning decides to take a sip of his tea rather than respond. The heat of the cup soothes his sore fingers, though he barely notices; he’s preoccupied by the Xia Sini feed. Mo Ran is approaching the shell, hands clenching and unclenching at his sides, his handsome face somewhere between determined and remorseful.

He could shut off the feed, vanish before Mo Ran arrives to say whatever he’s going to say. Manifesting the shell had been a mistake, an indulgence Chu Wanning could not afford — but the hurt within him rose too high, and crested the walls he erected to contain it. That much pain had to go somewhere, and so he gave it all to Xia Sini. Who, unlike Chu Wanning, was allowed to cry.

Xia Sini? says Mo Ran, tentative.

Chu Wanning’s heart seems to stop, then picks up again, twice as fast. *Go away*, he says through Xia Sini. He could leave, of course — but Xia Sini can stay, just like he can cry. He can be weak and listen to Mo Ran a little longer.

“It’s good to have you back, Yuheng,” says Xue Zhengyong. “No matter what you say! And I know your students are happy about it, too. You’ll have to explain to them why you were gone so long, though. Worried ‘em sick, you know.”

Worried for his safety? Hardly. Everyone knows the Yuheng Elder is more at home at the barrier than he is on-station, after all.

I will, if you want me to. Mo Ran’s throat works as he inches closer to Xia Sini. *But first...*

Chu Wanning's hands are trying to shake. He sets his cup down and stares at Xue Zhengyong's viewscreen, which currently displays the various ships on approach to the station.

"Any troubles out there at the barrier?" When Chu Wanning glances his way, Xue Zhengyong shrugs and fans himself a little harder. "You were out there for weeks, Yuheng! Weeks! I'm allowed to be a little concerned. Speaking of which, you're looking awful pale. You talk to the cooks, all right, get them to make you something decent."

Chu Wanning will do no such thing, and they both know it. The knowledge never stops Xue Zhengyong from trying.

"There's nothing of concern," Chu Wanning says. An enormous cargo ship lumbers across the viewscreen, inching through its approach to the station. His ocular implants zoom in automatically on the ship's hull, revealing the words *Butterfly Town* written in rose-red letters across its hull.

I shouldn't have said those things about Chu Wanning where you could hear them, says Mo Ran. He shivers a little. Chu Wanning scans the ambient temperature on the garden level, finds it at the bottom of the acceptable range. Frowning, he tries to use Xia Sini to access the local climate controls, but Xue Zhengyong clears his throat, prompting Chu Wanning for more information.

"The Rift itself is active," he says. Mo Ran's wide, dark eyes fill his head — but they aren't looking at him, are they? Just his friend, little Xia Sini, who had the bad luck to be created by cold, hollow Chu Wanning. His throat tries to close, but he forces himself to keep speaking. "However, the barrier engines show no sign of wear. I'll return in eight weeks to review and repair, as scheduled."

Where I belong, he thinks.

I don't know how I feel, says Mo Ran. He looks almost like a boy again, hurt and scared and hopeful all at once. Beautiful, then, now, and always. Chu Wanning's longing could burn up an entire galaxy.

"You just got back!" Xue Zhengyong sighs. "Ah, Yuheng, you need a family to come back to. I was just saying to my wife, Yuheng needs—"

"If there's nothing else, station leader," Chu Wanning interrupts, "then please excuse me. You have my full report."

"Ah, I never read those things." Xue Zhengyong waves him toward the door with his fan. "Your word's good enough for me. Now you'd better get some rest, if you won't get a wife!"

Chu Wanning won't be doing that, either. He stands, and bows politely and firmly to Xue Zhengyong. The *Butterfly Town* is close enough now to see how the rose-red paint has peeled away in strips, along with a few stains from minor debris collisions. Odd that they haven't been repaired.

He pauses as a stray thought crosses his mind.

"Station leader," he says, "when is the *Butterfly Town* due to arrive?"

"It's not." Xue Zhengyong hides a yawn behind his fan. "Decommissioned it two years ago after it came too close to the Rift unshielded. Scrapped it, sent the remains sunward. It's—"

He blinks and glances at Chu Wanning. "Station!" he shouts, the rest of his command subvocalized. "The garden levels," he says to Chu Wanning, who's already running, already out the door.

Later, Chu Wanning will be grateful Xue Zhengyong trusted him so completely — will give thanks that the station leader didn't ask questions before raising the alarm. But that's hours from the panicked moment between realization and action. Here, in the present, Chu Wanning only resents those extra seconds spent doing anything other than fighting off the incursion. Those extra seconds spent not finding Mo Ran, and saving him.

The jokes about soulless, unfeeling AIs are in pretty bad taste. Mo Ran's always thought so. They've got the full range of emotions that comes with sapience — and, yeah, he knows what that means now, he looked it up. AIs just... process those emotions differently. Faster. In dimensions made of pure computational matter. Anger and happiness, all made of math.

There's nothing that says AIs can't cry. It's still a shock when Mo Ran comes around the end of a row and finds Xia Sini crying under *the* haitang tree.

His first instinct is to walk away, pretend he didn't see or hear anything. It's not an instinct he's proud of, but Mo Ran doesn't have a lot of

those. Whenever he tries to do the right or kind thing, it turns to shit in his hands. Knowing that they'd only make whatever was happening worse, who wouldn't walk away?

Mo Ran doesn't. He ignores that shitty first instinct for an even shittier impulse: to try and apologize. Like that's ever gone well for him, either.

"Xia Sini?" he asks, barely a whisper.

The tiny sniffles choke off, and the miserable grey-scale shell of Xia Sini rises a few feet off the ground. The spinning layers move in slow, hurt circles, and dark violet stains are scattered across the surface. Like bruises. Mo Ran's heart feels like it's been kicked.

"Go away, Mo Ran," says Xia Sini. A few angry pulses of red dart across his shell. "Leave!"

"I will, if you want me to." Mo Ran realizes he's cut off his own plan, then adds: "But first... can I apologize?"

"No!" Xia Sini starts to float away, still slow, still bruised. "I don't want to talk to you."

"I was a jerk, I get it. I shouldn't have said those things about Chu Wanning where you could hear them. Really, I'm sorry, I just—"

"Just what!" The entire shell flares red. Incursion alarm red. *I've been crying for hours* red. "You talk so much, Mo Ran. You don't listen. You never asked — you didn't want to know about why I..."

The tiniest hitch in Xia Sini's voice, like a hairline fracture in a nice piece of glass.

"So what if you're sorry?" Xia Sini asks. The layers of vines close in on the central flower — a five-petal haitang blossom, Mo Ran realizes, weeks too late. Because of course it is. He just didn't care enough to see it. "You still said it. And that's all you're sorry for. You're not s-sorry for feeling it, are you?"

No, Mo Ran nearly says. Because he's not, is he? What had he said that isn't true? What part of Chu Wanning isn't cold, isn't awkward, judgmental, cruel?

Does that mean it needed to be said?

The seam at his shoulder starts to ache, a chilly, bone-deep hurt. At least it's a change from the tingling burn from the last few weeks. Easier to ignore, too.

"I don't know," he says, running his thumb along the seam. The ceramic is cool to the touch, his skin somehow cooler. "I'm... I didn't... I don't hate him, you know? Chu Wanning. I don't. It's just that I—"

"It hurts," says Xia Sini, as if Mo Ran hadn't spoken. "Knowing you feel that way. Everyone does, don't they? Everyone feels the way you do."

"How could they? I don't even know how I feel!" Mo Ran runs his hands through his hair, startled at how *cold* he is, all over. A current of air stirs through the plants and breaks blossoms off the haitang's branches. "Sometimes I think he hated me right from the beginning. Like I was never going to be good enough."

"You never asked him," Xia Sini whispers. He's floating away again, with his edges blurring like he's about to fold this shell away and vanish. Mo Ran follows him for a few steps, itching to reach out, knowing he shouldn't. "No one did."

Who cares! Who gives a fuck! Chu Wanning doesn't, why should I? He thinks I'm trash! Always has, always will. I nearly died and he just wanted to tell me what I did wrong. What am I supposed to do with that, huh? Tell me!

He lets the words sweep through him, but doesn't let himself speak. The inside of his head feels scalded from the heat of his anger but he doesn't speak. Yes, he's angry and hurt, and yes, he has every reason to be — but what Xia Sini's saying is true. He never asked Chu Wanning anything at all.

Mo Ran tries hard as he can not to think about waking up in the medbay with Chu Wanning standing over him, pale and shadow-eyed. He doesn't want to remember the shouting that followed, the teeth-bared anger that seemed large enough to swallow the station whole.

Now he does. Now he remembers Chu Wanning, how his hands shook on his knees, how red and tired his eyes had been. The bandages peeking out of his robes, his lank, unwashed hair. Mo Ran forgot all of that in the anger that came after.

"He was there the whole time, wasn't he?" Mo Ran says to himself. At the corner of his eye, almost hidden by the plume of his breath, Xia Sini flashes brief all-over gold. "Chu Wanning. He was there and I never..."

"Mo Ran." Nervous flashes of green and blue light up Xia Sini's grey shell. "The cold—"

Too late. Mo Ran recognizes the oncoming incursion seconds before it arrives. He has time for a subvocal warning to the station sysfeed before the glass overhead rips open with a sound like a giant belching, and the air screams into vacuum.

A woman's gaunt face, smeared with white handprints and with a second mouth circling her head like a crown, peers inside.

"Surprise!" she shrieks, her voices mingling with his mother's and Shi Mei's. "Surprise surprise surprise! I'm here they're here they're all here for *you!*"

Mo Ran guesses he has forty seconds before he runs out of air. He pulls his sword hilt from his belt and activates the blade as he starts to run. The woman keeps screaming and laughing as he comes.

"Xia Sini," he yells over the rush of escaping air, "go! Make sure they know—"

The woman pours inside, a snake-like body made of fat, boneless coils. She reaches for him with both arms. Mo Ran grins, and raises his sword. Thirty-five seconds. Thirty-four.

And then the lights go out, and there are claws at his throat. In his throat. Xia Sini screams his name.

"Hello," says the woman, her mouth at his. "Hello, Ran'er, hello."

What *is* the Rift?

Funny you should ask, because for every time that question's been asked, a different answer is offered. It's hell, says one person, only for the next to say it's pure chaos. A realm where the fundamental laws of our physics don't apply. A collective hallucination. A wound carved right into the heart of the universe, and left bleeding.

That's probably closest, but then wounds should heal, shouldn't they? Scab over, coagulate, grow shiny new scar tissue across the gap. Only a memory of pain and horror left behind as a warning.

The Rift doesn't heal. It can be contained, through hard, unglamorous work — which is why it was left to the unglamorous Sisheng Peak Station, and the defenders living there. A thousand barrier engines hold it back, keep the rot from that festering, seething wound from touching the rest of the galaxy — but the engines can fail, and so a person has to watch over them, in case anything breaks through.

And it does. Oh, it always does.

See Mo Ran in the garden level, fighting in the dim emergency lights. See him bleeding across the floor and the stains splattered against what's left of the wall and the remains of the beautiful, orderly rows of plants. He has nine seconds of air left. His gravity will last for five of those seconds.

Now watch the blood, Mo Ran's blood, lift off the leaves and walls and float in messy globules until the air escaping through the hole in the wall catches them, and sends them spiraling out and away in frozen clumps.

Chu Wanning, who for weeks has outsourced his emotions, good and bad, to a tiny, half-finished communication shell, is running through the red-lit halls of the station. Which are empty, because the station's residents are well aware of how to deal with an incursion. There are really only two options: hide in your quarters and pray the effects don't ripple out to your hiding space, or die, horribly, lost to vacuum or eaten alive by whatever the Rift decided to shit out this time.

He reaches the garden level — sealed off, of course, because the station AI has done its best to contain the incursion and save as many of its residents' lives as possible — just as Xue Meng and Shi Mei do. Unlike Chu Wanning, they're in full armor, masked and ready to survive anything less than a direct railgun hit.

Unlike Chu Wanning, they pause before trying to go inside. He slides within, slicing through the layers of the station's preservation commands in less than a breath, Tianwen already manifesting from the implant in his palm.

What a dreadful, fascinating irony that the haitang tree is the only one left standing. Not that Chu Wanning or Mo Ran have noticed, but we can forgive them that, can't we? They're preoccupied, after all: Mo Ran with not dying, Chu Wanning with finding him. But we can notice it, and smile, reassured.

Two seconds of air left. How cold it is in this part of the garden level, though not as cold as you'd think. The station is doing its best to keep all of itself alive. And Mo Ran, who should have run when the bulkhead broke — who should have run three years ago, just as Chu Wanning told him to — is still grappling with that slippery, boneless nightmare, even as its claws tear him open.

The shell of Xia Sini is darting around the struggling forms, trying to find a way to hurt the incursion without hurting Mo Ran — you didn't think Chu Wanning had been idle on his way down to the garden level, did you? Of course he wasn't; he was fighting as best he could with every step. Anything for Mo Ran, any way to apologize for the colossal misunderstandings between them.

But there's nothing Xia Sini can do, not against so much unleashed hate. Mo Ran is strong but he's slowing, all the air gone from his lungs, and there's more blood floating around him than there is within him. He keeps fighting, because keeping people safe is all he's ever wanted to do. If he can save one person — it's worth it. So he thought as he disobeyed Chu Wanning three years ago, and so he thinks now.

"Mo Ran!" Chu Wanning calls. Pointlessly, it must be said; his voice is lost to vacuum. But — Xia Sini calls out for him too, and that Mo Ran hears. He looks up and across the ruined garden, to where Chu Wanning is running toward him, Tianwen raised for the killing blow.

He smiles. Not at Xia Sini, but at Chu Wanning, who he never really hated, not once, not ever. How lucky for them both that human wounds can heal, even if we never feel it.

"Laoshi," he says, silently.

Chu Wanning's heart is all light. If the rest of his life is just this — blood, cold, and terror — it would be worth it, just for Mo Ran calling to him with a smile on his face.

The incursion shrieks — the answer to whether or not they're intelligent, or if they're piloted by something that is, will never be answered — and swells to two, three, four times its size. Chu Wanning reaches Mo Ran's side just as the air runs out completely, and the incursion descends.

Do they live? Of course they do. What kind of story do you think is being told here?

They live. It's a close thing, but they live. And they will live, for many years to come. There's still so much for them to see and do, together. But before all that—

According to Madam Wang, Mo Ran lost a solid sixty percent of his blood before Xue Meng managed to drag him up to the medbay. Lucky for him, his implants are set up to deal with just this kind of scenario, and sent him into a semi-coma until he got installed in one of the reparative chambers. A few regular infusions take care of the lost-blood issue, but as for all his other problems — which include a nearly-severed left leg, a concussion, and decompression sickness — only time and start of the art medical assistance can help him.

He also has one broken toe, which is more insult than injury, considering everything else.

Still, within six hours of regaining real consciousness, not the semi-awake state he was in when Madam Wang checked him for brain damage, he's out of bed and limping down to Chu Wanning's quarters. With Xue Meng in tow.

"You can't bother Chu-laoshi!" his cousin yells, loud enough to scatter the repair crews filling the corridor. "I won't let you! I don't care that you nearly died, I *will* kill you if you annoy him! You'll be begging for that incursion to come back and finish the job before I'm—"

Mo Ran turns slowly, listening to his healing body creak as he moves, and presses a finger to Xue Meng's mouth. A flesh finger, since his prosthetic arm hangs useless at his side, all the connections broken. "Shhhh, Mengmeng. You're bothering the baby."

"What baby?" say Xue Meng, his rage broken by honest confusion.

“Me.” Mo Ran turns around and starts to hobble toward the lift. “I’m the baby.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Xue Meng shrieks. *“What the fuck, that joke is literally ten thousand years old, I hate you, I wish you were dead, leave laoshi alone!”*

He’s so busy screaming that he doesn’t watch where he’s going. The collision with the repair tech gives Mo Ran just enough time to slip into the lift and vanish, waving bye-bye as Xue Meng disappears from view. Then, he leans his head against the cool wall and lets out a long, shaky sigh.

According to Madam Wang, Chu Wanning checked himself out of medbay twelve hours before Mo Ran did. Against her wishes, she stated, very clearly. Mo Ran nodded along, and then did the exact same thing. And now he feels like five different kinds of shit, exactly like she said — but he couldn’t lie in that bed and not... do something. Say something. There was nothing he could do but obey the urge telling him to find Chu Wanning, wherever he was.

And if Chu Wanning doesn’t want to talk to him, when Mo Ran does find him? Then at least Mo Ran tried, right?

Right.

Chu Wanning lives on one of the oldest levels of the station, a truly unhip and uncomfortable place that’s only notable for the lotus ponds dotting the mostly-empty residential areas. Mo Ran’s only ever come this way as part of a punishment — organizing Chu Wanning’s library of actual books, for example — but he knows the way. Even if he didn’t, he’d know he was on the right track when Xia Sini pops into being directly in front of him. His shell is gold again, but lit up by flashes of blue and green.

“Mo Ran, you should be back in medbay,” he says. Darting closer, then floating away as soon as Mo Ran takes another step. “Don’t be stupid. You’re still healing.”

“But Chu Wanning checked himself out hours ago,” he replies, with an easy grin.

“Your arm needs to be recalibrated as soon as possible.”

“Ah, that’s a good point. Can you help with that? Since you made it, and all.”

Xia Sini freezes. His shell turns the forest green of pure terror.

“Yeah, I figured it out.” He shrugs and rubs the back of his neck. “Well, Shi Mei let it slip about the arm. He says he’s sorry, by the way. But I... I probably should have known from the beginning. About everything. Xia Sini talked just like you, Chu Wanning.”

“You! Mo Ran! I’m your— I’m your teacher.” Xia Sini’s layers start to move again, the willow vines — again, Mo Ran should have figured this out ages ago — twisting in furious distress. “Shameless, disrespectful, you—”

“Is laoshi going to find a verb any time soon?” Mo Ran asks sweetly.

“Mo Weiyu!”

It should not be as endearing as it is, listening to Chu Wanning’s blistering temper pour out of a shell no bigger than Mo Ran’s hand. Mo Ran can’t help the fondness rising in him. He doesn’t want to. His entire body feels like it’s crawling with fire ants and he’s pretty sure he’s bleeding again, but this is the best he’s ever felt. For once, he’s gotten it right.

“Sorry,” he says. “I’ll stop teasing. I just came down to say one thing, and then I’ll go.”

“Mo Ran never says just *one thing*,” sulks Xia Sini.

“I’ll do my best, then. How’s that?” When Xia Sini — Chu Wanning — doesn’t interrupt, Mo Ran takes a deep breath, and makes the most formal, respectful bow his body will let him, hauling his prosthetic arm into place. It’s not much, but hopefully the message comes across.

“I’m sorry, Chu-laoshi,” he says. “I was unfair, unkind... I was wrong. I apologize for the disrespect, and promise to make up for it from now on.”

He holds the bow as long as he can, till his back is screaming for relief and his eyes water. When he straightens up, Xia Sini is gone, and the door to Chu Wanning’s quarters is closed.

Well, he did what he came down here to do. Mo Ran swallows the disappointment, and shuffles around to get back to the lift. Maybe now they can build something better. It’s too much to ask for a totally fresh

start, but without that ball of anger in his chest, Mo Ran can just be a good student. A good person, the kind who won't piss off Chu Wanning every chance he gets.

He gets three steps before Xia Sini reappears, strobing between gold and white so fast it makes Mo Ran dizzy.

"I—" He disappears, then reappears. "Mo Ran..."

"It's okay." Mo Ran smiles. "Laoshi doesn't have to say anything. I was the one who needed to apologize. May you heal well. I'll stop bothering you now."

Behind him, the door to Chu Wanning's quarters opens.

It's so much easier, talking through Xia Sini. Chu Wanning wishes he had thought of this years ago. He's tempted to use it for everything now, though Xue Zhengyong would protest if Xia Sini showed up for dinner, instead of Chu Wanning.

Strong as that temptation is, he pushes past it, and forces himself to open the door. Shame boils through him; he knows he looks more disgusting than ever, and weaker, too, an old man who nearly died fighting off a single incursion. But Mo Ran came all the way here, when he should have been healing, to offer the most unnecessary apology of all time — surely Chu Wanning's face isn't so thin he can't offer his own apology, in person.

It very nearly is. When Mo Ran begins to turn around, Chu Wanning almost shuts the door again. The fact he holds fast and doesn't take a heroic amount of willpower. And it's worth every ounce of effort to see Mo Ran smile at him. Just for him, as Chu Wanning always dreamed.

In the end, he says nothing at all. He does apologize, in his halting, awkward way, flushed to his hairline and crawling out of his skin, but he does it hours later, in the quiet of the night cycle. Now, he watches Mo Ran approach, step by halting step, and even manages to take a step or two of his own, though his body aches and he limps pathetically the whole time.

At least he feels like he's earned it, when Mo Ran's hand finally touches him. Rough fingers weave through his own, warm, healthy tan against bruised paleness.

No telling how long they stand there, Chu Wanning hardly daring to breathe in case it shatters the moment. He doesn't bother counting. Time itself stops mattering when Mo Ran sighs his name and slips his arm around Chu Wanning's shoulders. A liberty, shocking and presumptuous — and Chu Wanning melts into it, almost shaking with the need to be closer yet. He could never be close enough.

"Wanning," says Mo Ran, his voice a gift in this quiet, abandoned part of the station. A sound that seems the foundation of all else in the universe, the force cleaving atoms together and pushing stars to ignite.

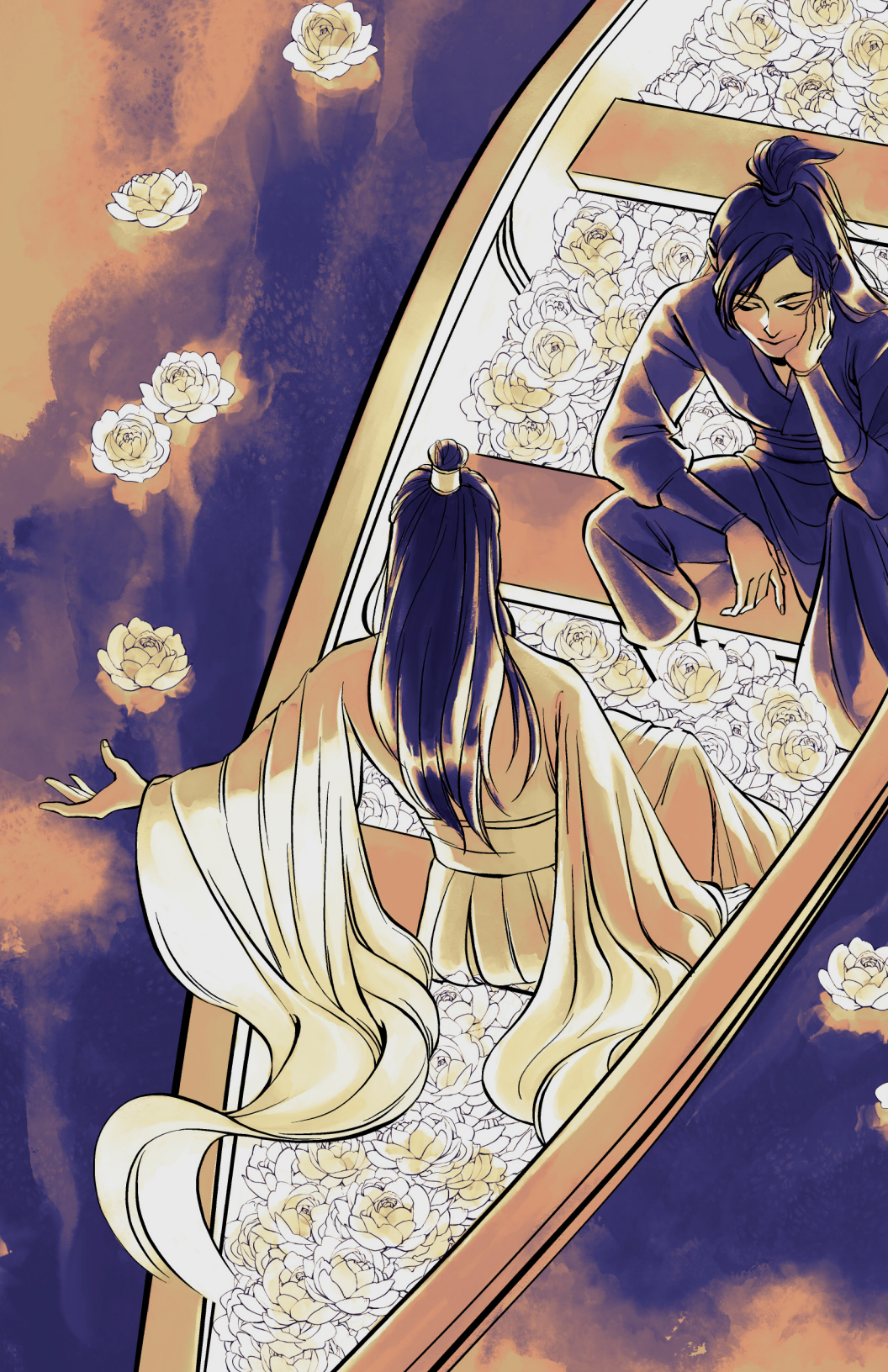
"Shameless," he says, hiding his face in Mo Ran's chest. It hardly seems possible — it can hardly be deserved — but Mo Ran just pulls him tighter, his body warm and undeniable against Chu Wanning's.

Mo Ran laughs. His fingers play up and down Chu Wanning's spine, careful of all his bruises. "I am," he says. "Especially for Wanning. How could I not be?"

He'll surprise Mo Ran later with Xia Sini's neural shock, Chu Wanning decides, inhaling Mo Ran's rich, inviting scent. But for now — for now he will hoard this moment, and its joy.

In a thousand years, Sisheng Peak Station will remain, guarding against the Rift and everything within it. No one alive will remember Chu Wanning, or Mo Ran; the AIs will know them as useful datapoints, notable only for historical context.

Deep in the garden levels, however, there will be a tree, well-tended and healthy, like all trees on Sisheng Peak. If one looks closely — and one would have to look closely indeed — one may catch a glimpse of something swift and golden, well-hidden in the flowering branches. A secret, perhaps, or a memory. Hard to say. But it remains, and will remain, until Sisheng Peak is nothing but atoms and the Rift itself has died. Until the last, silent stars burn out.



PART III.
THE TIES THAT BIND US

Fate





Love Again

BY EYA

Chu Wanning wanders aimlessly through each day, with as much enthusiasm for what he does as he would feel for a soggy piece of bread left on the floor.

He's not unhappy about it; in fact, he's quite comfortable with the mundanity of it all. Chu Wanning wakes up, gets ready for work, stands in front of a hundred or so students for seven hours, goes home with some takeout from a hole-in-the-wall food stall, and sleeps. Rinse and repeat. It's a cycle he's followed for almost ten years now, and it hasn't failed him once since then.

Sometimes, on very rare occasions, he feels random bouts of loneliness, like his soul is yearning for something that doesn't exist. But even then, Chu Wanning is more than accustomed to the feeling of being alone, of having no one but himself to lean on in life. After all, it is all that he has ever felt for most of his life.

He quietly stuffs his teaching materials into the briefcase he usually carries to work, intent on spending some more time in the University's library to review the papers he put off last night. The steady hum of the air conditioning makes a good harmony with the crinkling of papers and the sound of the lock of his briefcase clicking in place. Before he

leaves, Chu Wanning takes one more sweeping glance at his classroom. Everything is in place and he can leave for the day.

The walk to the library is uneventful, for there are barely any students or faculty members left in this part of the building. Chu Wanning's well-worn shoes trudge over waxed floors as he recalls his agenda for tonight, swiveling through corners and stairways with pure muscle memory. When he reaches the glass sliding doors, he sees one of the student interns tending on a clutter at a nearby table.

Chu Wanning enters without fanfare, but the intern still whips her head up to greet him all while clutching some five or so books in one arm. Unfortunately, in her haste to acknowledge Chu Wanning's presence, one of the books slides out of her arms and onto the floor, which then leads to her tripping on said book and spilling the remaining ones in her arms.

"Fucking hell." Chu Wanning hears the intern curse as he makes his way to help her. He lays his briefcase on the floor before he kneels down to gather up the mess, stacking them into a neat pile before straightening up to hand them over to the intern. "Uh, sorry about that. Thank you, Chu-laoshi."

Before he can muster up a reply, the title of one book catches Chu Wanning's eyes.

'The Art of the Underworld: A Demon's Archive' is what's written on the seemingly innocuous cover. There's nothing very eye-catching about it, but Chu Wanning, ever the connoisseur of history and the mystical, finds himself drawn towards the book. He reaches out to trace the characters with a single digit, and the air around him stands still.

"Would you like to borrow that, Chu-laoshi?" The intern snaps Chu Wanning out of his momentary trance as she holds out her hands to take the books from his grasp. Chu Wanning lets her, his eyes still trained on the pitch black cover and the fading white color of the letters engraved on it. "Chu-laoshi?"

"Mn?"

"Would you like to borrow this book? I saw you eyeing it just now." Said book is now being carefully thrust into Chu Wanning's hands.

The texture feels smooth despite the obvious signs of aging around the edges and its weight is somehow quite familiar.

Chu Wanning takes the book from her with a solemn expression, muttering a quick thanks as he picks up his briefcase and heads over to an empty table near the windows.

It's not news Chu Wanning tends to forget about his surroundings — and himself, on most occasions — whenever he works, so it is no surprise the very same intern whom he borrowed the book from comes striding to his table some time later, clearing her throat as she waits for Chu Wanning's head to pop out from the clutter of papers and his laptop.

Apparently, the library needs to close for the night, and they are the only people left inside the whole building. Chu Wanning sheepishly excuses himself after arranging his things.

The book remains in his briefcase, still unopened.

Chu Wanning promptly forgets he borrowed something from the library the moment he gets home, intent on getting himself a quick dinner before he drowns himself yet again in even more paperwork. The vegetable stir fry isn't that bad, although some parts of it are either still too tough or burnt into a crisp. Nonetheless, it's still edible.

The hours trickle by like grains of sand through one's fingers, and before Chu Wanning knows it, his head is dangerously swaying from exhaustion. He ultimately passes out right on the table he's working on, a good three hours after midnight.

He doesn't usually dream, especially not when he's locked in an uncomfortable position such as this, but tiny pinpricks of images start to dot the corners of Chu Wanning's mind, then become clearer and much more coherent.

There's— there's a throne before him, and on it sits a man with a tall stature, his face unidentifiable and his dark robes old-fashioned. The chilly air sends pinpricks of shivers on his skin, and that's when Chu Wanning registers that he is barely clothed, that there is only a thin piece of black underrobe separating his skin from the harsh cold. He shivers, and the man cranes his head to look at him.

“Shizun.” His voice is dark, hinted with a promise of death and destruction. It’s terrifying, but Chu Wanning stands his ground. “Do you submit?”

Chu Wanning wants to say something, wants to ask the man for an explanation, but it seems like he is only a spectator in this meager body. He opts to avoid the man’s gaze, glaring at the stone floor with a strange sense of petulance. They seem to be inside a large building, judging from the vast expanse of space around them.

The man in front of him chuckles. “Chu Wanning.”

Chu Wanning stops in his tracks. Did he just—

Suddenly, there’s a rough hand forcing him to look up, and he finds the mysterious man is only inches away from him, his face still a blurry mess of lines and shapes. Chu Wanning couldn’t discern his appearance even if he tried to, but he does make out a deep aubergine color where his eyes should be. The man lets out an intimidating scoff at the sight of Chu Wanning’s face, leaning closer and closer until—

The world around him shifts without any warning, and the man in front of him fades out of existence as Chu Wanning’s environment melts away to reveal a new one, something much more dark and desolate than the empty hall he had just been in.

What he does recognize though, is pain.

Hot, searing pain courses through Chu Wanning’s body, breaking through his very blood and flesh with its sharp talons. He’s shivering, that much he knows, and it seems like his numbed arms are chained to the ceiling — possibly the only thing keeping him upright at this moment.

He seems to be... in a prison. These dreams sure are getting more and more interesting the longer it drags on.

“Look at me, Chu-meimei.” His eyes snap towards a corner of the room as he realizes he is not alone in the cell. It’s the voice of a woman this time, her figure still a distant blur to Chu Wanning’s eyes. She saunters towards him while holding an unknown contraption in her hands, something that is made of metal and wood, and looks very much like the pliers he has at home. She lifts it up, up until the tip of it

rests at Chu Wanning’s chin, tilting his face ever so slightly. “I want to see your face as I do this to you.”

Do what?

Before Chu Wanning can even think of an answer to his own question, a sharp throb resonates through his very being as the woman uses the tool to remove an entire fingernail from his hand. Surprisingly enough, the body he is in doesn’t scream in pain, and instead only hisses in response even through the buzzing in his ears.

This must go on for quite a lot of time, long enough for him to start feeling dizzy from too much blood loss. Chu Wanning wonders how the owner of this body is still conscious from the brutal treatment.

“I hope you learned your lesson now, Chu-meimei.” For some absurd reason, Chu Wanning bristles at the shrill tone of the woman’s voice — he despises it, the condescension bleeding through her intonation, the scorn that is evident whenever she mentions his name. His ruined fingers twitch as if they want to grasp something, something to keep the woman quiet for a long, long time—

Before his thoughts can veer off to dangerous territories, Chu Wanning’s surroundings change once more. This time, he is not kneeling on the cold stone floor, nor is he chained inside a prison cell.

No, Chu Wanning is in the middle of a battlefield, cradled in the arms of a man.

The same deep-set purple eyes greet him, but this time, there is an addition of a hazy silhouette depicting a well-built man. Chu Wanning sighs at the strange sense of familiarity that they hold, even though the same person had mocked and demanded him to submit a few moments prior to this. It seems now, as he leans into strong yet trembling arms, Chu Wanning can trust him. At least just for a little while.

It is then the pain makes itself known once again, and this time, it’s deeper, much more palpable than the last, like every nerve in him has been severed and every bone shattered into pieces.

Chu Wanning feels... tired.

“Forgive myself?” A hoarse voice, entirely different from the haughty and overconfident lilt the man brandished earlier. He sounds... broken. And yet he’s picking up the pieces with his bare hands in hopes of

hiding his true emotions. “Your last wish is for me to forgive myself?” And then he laughs, loud and wet. He laughs until he is out of breath and his entire body starts to shake. “Chu Wanning, ah Chu Wanning, you’re even crazier than me!”

Chu Wanning’s heart aches for some reason. And even when this body is practically at the brink of death, it still forces itself to breathe, to talk and chastise the man above him. “Don’t laugh anymore, I can’t bear to see you like this...”

Those dark eyes snap towards him once more, dull and empty. He looks more dead than Chu Wanning, even when Chu Wanning is the one who is gravely injured.

Chu Wanning gathers one final shaky breath, and speaks.

“It was I who wronged you; and so I won’t blame you, even in life or in death...” A pause. “Don’t do this anymore—” Chu Wanning can feel his lips curl around the syllables of what seems to be the man’s name, but he can’t decipher what it is just yet. “You have to turn back, and... wake up...”

Wake up.

Chu Wanning rouses in a cold sweat.

When he comes to, it is already thirty minutes past his usual alarm. Chu Wanning seizes up like he is electrocuted, ignoring the protests of his joints as he quickly arranges the now crumpled papers on his desk into a somewhat presentable stack. His laptop is long shut down, its battery probably drained after being left open all night. What a great start to his day.

But Chu Wanning has no time to lament over such things. He hurries to the bathroom to clean himself up, shedding his clothes on the way and uncaring of where they land. As his bare feet meet the chilled tiles of his bathroom, he instinctively turns towards the mirror adjacent to the open door.

He’s— he’s crying.

Chu Wanning numbly lifts a hand to feel the wetness on his cheeks. It was no doubt from the dream he had, but *why*? And how come he hadn’t noticed it as soon as he woke up?

His mind wanders back to the bizarre events that occurred last night. The unfamiliar places he was in, the fact everyone he encountered seemed to know his name, the fact everything felt too *real*. Like he had actually lived through these moments himself, and was simply taking a stroll through the memories of his past.

Not to mention the man that appeared in his dream twice. Even now, Chu Wanning can still feel those colored irises on his skin, piercing through flesh and bone to find the deepest parts of his soul. If he focuses hard enough, he can make out a vague image of what the rest of the man might look like, but any attempt of recollection causes his already confused brain to ache even more.

And so Chu Wanning resigns himself to just leaving it at that. The answers will probably come to him sooner than later.

As he dashes his way out of the bathroom to get some fresh clothes, Chu Wanning almost trips on something.

It’s the book he got from the library last night. Perplexed, Chu Wanning picks it up, wondering how on earth it ended up on the floor. The edge of the front cover is slightly folded due to his clumsiness so Chu Wanning immediately smooths it out with a finger, brushing over the fold for a few times until it naturally smooths itself out.

He leaves it on a table beside his bed, reminding himself to start reading as soon as possible so he can return it before it’s due.

The door to his bedroom creaks ever so slightly.

As it turns out, the plans he made earlier in the morning turned out to be — that. Just plans.

Chu Wanning got too caught up in finishing a lecture he wouldn’t be presenting for two months, and before he knew it, he was half-asleep on his desk again. This time, though, he gathered up what was left of his wits to carry himself up and into his bed. The fact that he was still in his work clothes should have concerned him, but Chu Wanning already felt himself drifting before he could do something about his predicament.

He dreams again.

A part of Chu Wanning wants to go back to where he was last night — in the arms of a mysterious man with even more mysterious eyes, but instead, Chu Wanning finds himself high up in the sky, a situation he *never* wants to be in.

He also belatedly realizes he's standing on a sword. A really broad one, glinting in the moonlight and floating hundreds of meters above the surface. Somehow, it can support the weight of two grown men without any sign of tipping over, and Chu Wanning doesn't know if he should be mortified or intrigued at this discovery. Surely, as someone who is teaching engineering, he should find this groundbreaking and all, but he thinks he'd rather focus on keeping his balance and composure until he is certain they won't just plummet to the open sea.

Oddly enough, amidst the roaring of the wind in his ears as he zooms past the clouds and above the sea, he is somewhat at ease. Sure, the lingering fear of accidentally slipping and plummeting into the ocean still nags at the back of his mind, but at the same time, there's a part of him that knows he is safe. That the person standing next to him will never put him in danger.

Wait, person?

Chu Wanning tilts his head, and lo and behold, the same shade of purple greets him again. The man's face is slightly clearer tonight; Chu Wanning can recognize the hints of a smile so warm he feels it in his core, which is accompanied by a set of dimples that gives the man a young and vibrant aura.

The man looks so... *happy*, so unlike the person Chu Wanning met last night. He wonders if this memory had happened before the events of yesterday's dream.

"-zun, Shizun!"

Chu Wanning snaps out of his thoughts at the sound of the man's voice. His eyebrows wrinkle at the strange honorifics, so unlike the crass manner by which he had been called just last night.

"There you are. Are you feeling cold? Should we go back? Try your best not to look down, Shizun."

Overwhelmed by the amount of questions thrown his way, Chu Wanning continues to just stand in place, frozen in time as he tries

— and fails — to wrap his head around the fact that this is the same person from last night. He has changed drastically, exuding warmth and safety that easily overpower the dread that is slowly settling in the base of Chu Wanning's stomach. The prickling breeze and the fact he is at least a few hundred meters above sea level are all past him now. He is too entranced by the mysterious figure he can feel but can't truly see.

He wants to uncover the truth. He wants to touch this man, oh so badly, as if his entire being is pulled by the weight of gravity itself. For now though, Chu Wanning calms the ache in his fingertips and opens his mouth to speak.

"Hm?" Sixteen years of education, and this is all that Chu Wanning can muster.

However, the man seems unfazed with his poor excuse for an answer and even laughs in response, which somehow eases the slight tension between them.

His laughter sounds nice, Chu Wanning's brain helpfully supplies. It's a deep rumble that reverberates through his entire body, yet he finds comfort in it.

"I said," the man starts, angling his body just a tad closer in what Chu Wanning assumes is a subtle way of shielding him from the cold. Not like any of that is ever needed. Chu Wanning is already feeling heat bloom on his cheeks just from being under the man's gaze. "That you don't have to be afraid, Shizun. You can just look at me if it becomes too much."

Chu Wanning actually *bristles* at that, flustered at the thought of getting caught ogling someone he only knows through bits and pieces of fleeting dreams. His eyes quickly dart away, refusing to look anywhere near those deep pools of purple lest he actually lose control.

All of this must have been very amusing to the man in front of him, because Chu Wanning feels more than hears him laugh, a full-body bellow that causes the sword they stand on to actually sway, startling the both of them. Chu Wanning's fingers unconsciously reach out to hold onto something, but the other beats him to it. Before he knows it, his forearm is enclosed in a tight grip, his waist circled by a strong arm.

Huh.

"Careful," he says, in a manner so nonchalant Chu Wanning genuinely wonders if this often happens due to how naturally they both fall into position — like two puzzle pieces that fit together. The hand on his waist burns, its heat searing even through the layers of robes Chu Wanning wears, but it grounds him in such a way that his initial fear of falling to his death is long forgotten now.

This man seems to have a certain effect on him, for better or for worse.

Before Chu Wanning could ponder that further, the arms around his body retreat, along with the warmth they bring. And *no*, Chu Wanning is not at all disappointed at the sudden turn of events.

"Ah, this disciple shouldn't have touched Shizun so recklessly," the man says, almost sheepish. Chu Wanning can make out furrowed brows and an awkward smile, purple eyes trained to the ocean beneath their feet in embarrassment. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

A hum. "That's good then."

They settle into a somewhat comfortable silence after that. There is nothing but the sound of the wind whipping past their ears and waves crashing down below before the man beside him speaks up.

"Let's take a seat, Shizun."

And then they're sitting.

At this height, with just his legs dangling in the air, Chu Wanning feels the uneasiness creep back into him. The coldness of the night comes back in full force, this time sharper and crueler than before. Instinctively, Chu Wanning's arms wind up around his torso as he curls in on himself.

He thinks of last night's dream — if it could be called one. Of how vastly different it is from right now, even though the same man sits beside him. Chu Wanning has so many questions. Why does everyone seem to know who he is? Who exactly is this man beside him? And what had happened between the two of them, for him to turn a complete one-eighty against Chu Wanning?

A crackling sound chases away the thoughts running rampant in his mind. As if on cue, a surge of pleasant heat permeates the air around

them, along with the sight of blood-red haitang flowers that seem to dance in the air. Entranced, Chu Wanning unconsciously lifts a hand to touch one, wondering if they are as soft as the real thing.

Instead, a light chuckle is all he hears, and Chu Wanning abruptly puts his hand down in favor of glaring at the man beside him. He can feel his ears heat up in embarrassment, but he promptly dismisses it and whips his head back to the sky above.

The moon is awfully interesting tonight.

"Is Shizun embarrassed? I just put up a barrier to ward us from the cold," the man says, mirth evident in his voice. Chu Wanning ignores it. "Shizun... pay attention to me..."

Somehow, that particular statement makes him look. Even though Chu Wanning can't clearly see through the fog that blankets the man's face, he can sense he must have a silly expression on. Chu Wanning resorts to imagining him pouting like a dog who's been denied treats.

He tamps down the unknown fondness rushing through his chest when he speaks. "What do you want?"

"Hm, nothing." The man leans back on his arms, exhaling as he does so. "The moon looks beautiful tonight, doesn't Shizun think so too?"

"You could say that."

A hearty chuckle fills the air around them, loud and carefree and so much unlike the sinister leer that came from the same man just last night. Chu Wanning's chest ached for reasons he couldn't discern just yet. "I can think of something much more beautiful, though."

That catches Chu Wanning's attention. Looking over to his companion, he raises an inquisitive brow. The lines of his face are as blurred as ever, but Chu Wanning can vaguely make out the hints of a fond smile being directed at him. It's *too* warm inside the barrier now; he can barely hear anything besides the rapid thumps of his pulse. What is happening to him?

He hears a breathy exhale. "Chu Wanning."

It's the same name, uttered by the same person, and yet it feels so different. Gone is the dark lilt in the man's voice, as if he were disgusted from just saying Chu Wanning's name alone. Now it's replaced by an

unfamiliar softness that he does not dare name. He cannot. Chu Wanning cannot look into his eyes, not right now.

When he realizes he might have been worrying the man by not responding to him, he tries to formulate a somewhat coherent answer. "You seemed comfortable calling me 'Shizun' earlier."

There was stillness in the air before the man replied. "...I was wrong."

He really wasn't. Chu Wanning didn't mind the sudden change of address, he was just grasping for straws, trying to come up with any kind of response. He was just about to voice out his thoughts when—

"Wanning."

Chu Wanning freezes.

"Wanning, can I ask you something?"

He doesn't answer. Even when the man devotes his full attention to him, even when he scoots closer until their arms are touching, Chu Wanning doesn't dare look. He fears he would melt if he meets that heavy gaze. A few beats of silence pass by before he hears the man talk. "Actually, I'm not asking anything. I'm just going to tell you."

Chu Wanning swears his heart lurches to his chest when the man grabs ahold of his hand. The man's hand is calloused and bigger than his, much like how Chu Wanning remembers it to be, but it does not grab his chin to force him to look up at him like last night. It was just a light press of skin, almost shy in its nature.

He thinks of the million things the man could say. It can't be *that* bad, right? Chu Wanning may just have been overthinking things yet again; it might be something mundane and lighthearted. Maybe the man will even laugh and say he was just teasing him to see how he would react. The positives outweigh the negatives at this point, so Chu Wanning should really just relax and—

"Wanning, I love you."

The piercing sound of his alarm drags Chu Wanning rather rudely from his dream.

White sheets greet his eyes, reminding him of how dull reality actually is. The room is relatively dark seeing as the sun is barely above the horizon, and the sky still a muted blue dotted by a few persistent stars making the most of what little time they have left. Chu Wanning can

see himself in the way they twinkle as if to outshine the first few rays of the morning sun, wishing that he can fall back asleep and continue where his dream left off, but to no avail.

With a slight groan, he rolls over to the other side of the bed so he can dismiss the alarm, sighing as the clanging of wind chimes comes to a stop. He still has a solid hour and a half until his first class, so Chu Wanning briefly indulges in thinking about the things he witnessed over the past two days.

Okay, so he's been having... dreams. Nightmares? He's not sure if he would call them such as yet; the thought of painting them in a negative light doesn't sit right with him. Moreover, it feels like these nightly visions are somehow a part of him, everything about it feeling too familiar to just brush off carelessly.

And then there's the issue of the mysterious man with striking purple eyes.

When it comes to this particular aspect, Chu Wanning's train of thought hopelessly derails. There's a nagging feeling at the back of his mind that he *should* know who this man is and what role he plays in Chu Wanning's life, but he is at a loss for answers. All he knows is that this man might be the most dangerous yet gentlest person he ever met, and Chu Wanning doesn't know what to feel about that.

He thinks of the cold marble floor that kissed the knobs of his knees as he knelt submissively. Of powdery snow gathering on his brows and eyelashes as he painstakingly spoke through the blood in his throat. Of a bold confession that resounded through his entire being, sounding so confident and honest and *real*.

Chu Wanning takes a deep breath and runs a hand over his face. All this investigation can wait until later.

This time, Chu Wanning is prepared for whatever situation his dream will decide to throw him into.

Well. As prepared as he can be, that is.

Tonight's dream is a peculiar one, moving too fast for Chu Wanning to keep up. There is an unmistakable stench of blood in the air, but this is different from the first night. A bridge-like structure stands in

front of him, leading up to a huge rip in the sky where ghoulish monsters seem to pour out endlessly. The sight of it sends a chilling tremor through Chu Wanning's spine.

Upon closer inspection, he notices the path that leads up to the rift is composed of... bodies. Mangled, mutilated human bodies that are arranged to form a solid walkway. A path towards a new destination that was paved in blood. Chu Wanning dares not to look down as he inches closer to the grotesque piece of architecture in fear that the eyes of the martyred will look up at him in disdain, daring him to crush their bones with the soles of his feet.

Before Chu Wanning can take a cautious step, the sea of bodies before him is suddenly split in half, making way for a torrential wave of water that threatens to carry him away.

He falls.

The water embraces his body like some sort of twisted welcoming gesture. It's cold and unyielding, threatening to seep into his skin and gather inside his lungs until he drowns. Chu Wanning keeps getting swayed here and there from the sheer might of the current, but he can't seem to feel any pain. He can't feel anything at all.

Then, amidst the unforgiving deluge, there is salvation in the form of two strong hands wrapping around his shoulders. Chu Wanning feels himself pulled towards the surface, breaths coming in short, punched-out wheezes at the sudden onslaught of air. The hands that were on his torso now cradle the sides of his face like Chu Wanning is something is something to be treasured, someone whose presence will be deeply missed once it's gone.

He knows this is the same man that has been haunting him since the first night.

However, Chu Wanning can feel that something is wrong. The man's eyes look dim, resigned. Although he can't see the expression that the man is wearing, Chu Wanning guesses he is sporting a hopeless smile — like he had already come to terms with everything and is ready to part from this world. Chu Wanning wishes, *hopes*, that that is not the case.

The man pushes himself closer, closer until there's a mere inch between their noses, before he pivots his head to the side to land a light peck on Chu Wanning's cheek.

"Don't worry, Shizun." His voice is raspy. It sounds so *wrong*. "I am here, and I will still be here in the future." A hand caresses the slope of his lower jaw, rough like how Chu Wanning remembers it. "And that's why you should go back, Shizun. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

"But—"

For all the things that Chu Wanning had said about the man's hands, his lips sure are uncharacteristically soft.

It is nothing like what a regular kiss is supposed to be — not like Chu Wanning is an expert in the department. It is over the moment it started, leaving him even more puzzled than before. The surge of emotions washing over him didn't help either, and so he floats stock still in the water, cradled in the arms of a faceless man whose eyes are sharp and whose lips are soft.

"I'll wait for you in another world."

The indistinct visage of the man crumbles into dust, slipping through his fingers as Chu Wanning tries to hold him. There is nothing but ashes now; the last dregs of a man before he, too, becomes one with the soil he was birthed from. It scatters along the surface of the water like a spilled drink before it sinks, slowly but surely, taunting Chu Wanning in his distress.

He blinks, and he finds himself laying under a majestic tree the moment he opens his eyes. Gone are the millions of corpses laid out in the open only to be stepped on, as is the cruel ocean that swallows everything in its path.

A pair of very familiar eyes greet him, and with it, the rest of the man's face.

He's smiling — dimpled and warm, causing Chu Wanning's heart to somersault in his ribcage. The afternoon sun creates a halo around his dark hair, softening the lines around his face. Chu Wanning stares up at him, utterly entranced. The man is talking to him, something about how nice the weather is and how much vegetables are left in the kitchen and how it is almost time.

Chu Wanning pauses. Time for *what*?

“Don’t move too much, Wanning. It’ll be okay.”

That’s when he feels it. The dreadful sensation of decay emanating from within him. When Chu Wanning looks down on himself, he sees his hands mottled with rot, ugly brown running from the tip of his forefinger to the heel of his palm, reminiscent of a dying tree. It looks like his flesh has been carved open, but it doesn’t hurt. Nowhere in his body does Chu Wanning feel any pain. Almost as if this is nothing but a natural process for him — someone who is born to die.

When he blinks, the mist in his eyes grows thicker and thicker. When he breathes, his chest screeches in protest as if his organs are bound by long, winding vines. And yet Chu Wanning is at peace, more so than ever in his life.

To wither away in the arms of a lover — how bittersweet.

A hand swipes across his forehead, ridding his face of any stray piece of hair only to tuck them behind his ears. This close, Chu Wanning can make out the wrinkles at the ends of the man’s eyes, the curve of his nose, the sharpness of his jaw. When he smiles, his skin makes way for a set of dimples that Chu Wanning so desperately wants to lose himself in.

They stare at each other until the sun starts to sink below the horizon. Neither of them knows how much time has passed — it could be a few minutes or an hour. The man is the first one to break away from their little staring game, and Chu Wanning fights the urge to complain, wanting to savor this moment before he wakes up in his own bed, forced to face the dull reality he lives in.

“It’s about time, don’t you think so, baobei?” *Baobei*. Never in Chu Wanning’s meager life did he think he would be called such endearments. “You don’t have to worry about anything else; I won’t let anything go wrong.”

Chu Wanning doesn’t know what the man is talking about, but his body — his heart knows that he is safe. In the few days since he had met him, Chu Wanning has grown to trust the man with his life. So he nods confidently.

Light comes pouring from the man’s fingertips, vivid red like the haitang blossoms Chu Wanning witnessed last night. It twirls around in the air before plummeting to his chest, seeping through fabric and skin and muscles until it reaches his heart and twines around it in a welcoming embrace. Chu Wanning releases a soft sigh, limbs growing heavier by the second.

Behind them, the sky bleeds a cacophony of colors; from orange to pink to purple, mirroring that of the man’s eyes. It’s as if he is one with the earth, a being that can shake the ground at will, a power so tremendous he can have the world at his fingertips if he wishes so.

And yet, he chooses to be with Chu Wanning. Plain, boring Chu Wanning.

In his final moments, Chu Wanning feels the ghost of a kiss accompanied by a promise that will go beyond lifetimes on end.

“Sleep, Wanning. I will wait for you in another world.”

Chu Wanning wakes up.

He wakes up with an ache in his chest as the memories from last night come back to him in waves. Chu Wanning remembers the freezing temperature of the water made tolerable by a pair of lips that barely grazed his own, the whisper of a breeze as he lays on top of a strong chest while a dazzling red light dances between them. He had... died? In his dreams?

With a weary sigh, he makes his way to the bathroom so he can wash his face. Chu Wanning sees an ordinary man reflected in the mirror, someone who is easily forgettable and unimportant to everyone, and wonders: how can someone as powerful, as *breathhtaking* as the man from his dreams look at him like he is special?

Granted, it was just a dream. A made-up world that was conjured by his lonely mind. Chu Wanning knows better than to cling to something that isn’t even real.

It’s a weekend, Chu Wanning belatedly realizes. He doesn’t have any class today but a few worksheets still remain unchecked, so he trudges to the living room, a cup of steaming tea in his hand, and sits on the couch so he can tend to them as soon as possible.

Chu Wanning easily loses himself in the process. This is easy; a procedure he has done thousands of times, and now he can move on autopilot if the situation calls for it. Minutes flit by in a breeze as the sun settles high in the sky, announcing he has been buried in his paperwork for a good few hours now. Chu Wanning is not in the mood to eat something heavy just yet, so he grabs a random snack bar from the stash he keeps in his work briefcase and promptly dives back into checking the last worksheet.

When he finally allows himself to rest, it's already half past one in the afternoon. Chu Wanning stands up to stretch his limbs and tidy up the pens and papers that are scattered on the table and floor, wincing as his bones creak disapprovingly.

Something catches his eye: a dark object peeking from under a stack of test papers dated seven months ago. Chu Wanning brushes them aside to find a plain black book with the words *'The Art of the Underworld: A Demon's Archive'* printed on the cover.

Right. The book he borrowed from the library a few days ago.

Chu Wanning picks it up and scans the pages. It should be a fairly short read; he needs to finish it by next week anyway if he wants to return it on time so he might as well start reading it now he has the time to spare.

He puts away the graded worksheets and tidies the rest of his living room the best that he can — an overstatement, seeing how he just pushed things to the side or under the low table until he can't see them anymore. The couch that he bought with his first salary as a professor creaks under his weight as Chu Wanning settles into a comfortable position.

The book lays down a list of demons that walked the earth over the past few thousand years. Some of them Chu Wanning can recognize from being an avid fan of history himself, although there are a few he hasn't even heard the names of. Especially this particular one.

Chu Wanning runs a finger through the worn-out ink.

Mo Ran, Mo Weiyu. Is the name written in big, bold characters. *Formerly known as Taxian-jun, the once Emperor of the cultivation world in his past lifetime. Mo Weiyu was reborn under strange circumstances*

and came back as a younger version of himself, working his way from the ground up once again until he rose to the title of Zongshi of Sisheng Peak. Under the tutelage of Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning, he grew to be one of the most powerful cultivators of his time.

The illustration that accompanies this Mo Weiyu's name is unlike any other demon recorded in this book. Gone were the convoluted horns and disproportionate features that one would expect when you heard about a creature born from hell; instead, Mo Weiyu looks like a normal human being. He has a tall stature, broad shoulders, and dark hair swept up in a ponytail. The illustration depicts him smiling, showing off a deep set of dimples that catch Chu Wanning off-guard.

His dream from last night immediately comes to mind. This demon looks awfully similar to the mysterious man who has been plaguing him for nights on end.

A slight chill runs through the column of his spine.

"Mo Weiyu..." Chu Wanning tests the name on his tongue. It comes out much easier than expected, rolling off of his mouth like smooth honey, almost like he had been calling out the demon's name for a long time already. "Mo Ran."

The lightbulb above Chu Wanning's head flickers.

He pays it no mind — not that he could help himself. Chu Wanning feels like the words written on the yellowed pages of this strange book are pulling him in, every character wrapping itself around his body until he can't escape. The light goes out once again, and when it comes back, there's a shadow looming above him.

Chu Wanning looks up. He finds — a man. A tall, muscular, tan-skinned man with long horns that bend towards each other appears, wearing robes as dark as the night sky, like a certain owner of enchanting purple eyes. The man looks like he's as confused as Chu Wanning is on the matter of how he suddenly appeared in a middle-aged man's living room, but when his gaze lands on Chu Wanning, he stops in his tracks.

Chu Wanning finds—

"Mo Ran?"

It is a blur after that. Chu Wanning feels himself being swept off of his feet, the book sliding off of his lap and falling onto the floor. Suddenly, he is enveloped in so much warmth, his body handled with so much care and — dare he say — affection, that Chu Wanning is left reeling by the end of it.

He has never felt this before. Never felt so... loved.

Sure, the dreams were one thing. But being held, *actually* being held by a solid presence feels so right yet so surreal. This is something that he has not even considered happening to him, and yet here Mo Ran is, devoting his utmost attention to someone as mundane as Chu Wanning.

“Wanning.” The demon — *Mo Ran* says after what seems like an eternity of silence. He looks like he doesn’t believe what his eyes are seeing, either, with the way he sweeps his gaze over Chu Wanning’s form as if he’s greedily taking him in.

“How did you—”

“Wanning,” he says again, softer this time. Mo Ran is holding him by the waist as if he’s afraid that Chu Wanning will vanish at any time. How preposterous. “You found me.”

How utterly silly of this man.

“I did,” Chu Wanning mutters. For some ridiculous reason, he can’t help but keep as close to Mo Ran as possible, like a moth drawn to a flame. The only difference is that his frail wings will never turn into ashes no matter how bright Mo Ran burns. “Although it is also safe to say that *you* found me earlier than you expected as well.”

Mo Ran tilts his head questioningly. Chu Wanning is hopelessly endeared. “Is that so?”

Tales of his experiences from the past three days slip past Chu Wanning’s lips. As he diligently recites his story, pieces of information from a life he went through a long time ago started emerging, fitting themselves in the gaps of his memory as time passed by.

It’s somewhat jarring — going through so many emotions born from years of pain and forgiveness in such a short amount of time, but Chu Wanning accepts them for all of their worth, reveling in the euphoria of finally being complete. Mo Ran completes him.

He now knows that he was a cultivator and he took Mo Ran in as a disciple, that he died saving him, and they went to hell and back together — quite literally. Chu Wanning remembers the first time they kissed as lovers, with him pinned against the trunk of a tree, all while the townspeople were celebrating just a few meters away. Mo Ran muttered something against his lips that time, his message passed on through the press of their bodies and the slide of his tongue.

“I’m sorry I made you wait for a long time, Wanning.”

Not like Chu Wanning ever minded.

“Ah, I must have given you quite the scare.” His thoughts were interrupted by the low timbre of Mo Ran’s chuckle. Their faces are no more than an inch apart now; he can feel every puff of breath that escapes Mo Ran’s slightly parted lips, warm and inviting. “Sorry about that.”

“Nonsense.” Chu Wanning lightly flicks the man’s forehead with his thumb and his middle finger. A pleasant feeling sinks in his stomach. *Just like old times.* “Why would I be afraid of what I went through? If anything, those dreams helped me recollect my memories.”

Mo Ran’s expression brightens at that, eyes crinkling as he throws his head back to let out a small chuckle. His hold on Chu Wanning’s waist is as tight as ever, refusing to let go for even a second as he motions for them to sit on the couch. And, as if Mo Ran is still not content with their proximity, he pulls Chu Wanning closer until his weight settles on Mo Ran’s lap.

“Wh—” Completely taken aback by the sudden turn of events, Chu Wanning squirms as he adjusts himself into a more comfortable position. Red blooms on his cheeks when he realizes Mo Ran is studying his every move, like he is getting himself reacquainted to the sight of Chu Wanning this close to him. *“Mo Ran, what are you doing?”*

“Oh, nothing.”

He says, even though his eyes seem to communicate a completely different thought. They trail a path, completely entranced, from where Chu Wanning’s shirt is slightly askew down to his arm that is currently slung on the jut of Mo Ran’s shoulder. Sighing, Mo Ran releases one arm from Chu Wanning’s waist in favor of detaching the hand resting

on his shoulder, placing a light peck on each individual knuckle, his palm, and his wrist.

"I just missed this. Missed *you*. It's been three thousand years, after all." Mo Ran traces random patterns on the back of Chu Wanning's hand. Has it really been that long? "When I poured half of my soul into you, I knew that I would have to wait a long time for you to reincarnate because you're a... special case."

And it's true; they didn't even have a great chance of things working out in the first place, but here Chu Wanning is — alive and well and in Mo Ran's arms. It couldn't have been better than this.

"Nevertheless, I'm happy, Wanning. So, so happy."

Chu Wanning's heart skips a beat.

"And I as well, Mo Ran."

Then, as if they were two opposite ends of a magnet, Chu Wanning and Mo Ran gravitate towards one another, their lips meeting in the middle as sparks dance behind their eyelids.

Kissing Mo Ran feels like coming home. Kissing Mo Ran feels like the comfort that a warm soup can bring in a cold, wintery night. Kissing Mo Ran feels like he has finally gotten a taste of something that he had been deprived of for too long, and Chu Wanning is greedily taking anything that he can without any ounce of reservation.

They kiss for what feels like hours, until Chu Wanning is dizzy and flushed and Mo Ran is panting directly against his ear, where he knows Chu Wanning is sensitive. Goosebumps rise along his back and arms, heart beating a mile a minute when Mo Ran — cunning as ever — licks the shell of his ear and nips at it.

"Still as sensitive as ever." The tone of Mo Ran's voice takes on a dangerous turn, but Chu Wanning is not afraid. He willingly lets himself be devoured by the beast. "Tell me you want this, baobei."

He wants nothing more than to feel more of Mo Ran against him, on him, *in* him. Chu Wanning wants to make up for the years they spent apart from each other, wants them to relearn each others' bodies like it's the first time all over again. Mo Ran need not to ask him when it comes to these kinds of things, but the fact that he did causes a relieved sigh to escape from Chu Wanning's lips, delighted beyond belief.

But Chu Wanning is never the one who is good with words, so he lets the rest of him do the talking.

Their lips clash in a clumsy manner, more desperate than the last time. Mo Ran's hands are all over him now: caressing his clothed thighs, slipping under the hem of his shirt to grab ahold of his waist up to his chest, taking one nipple in each hand. Chu Wanning arches into the touch when Mo Ran pinches, producing a shaky exhale that the other man eagerly swallows.

"I'll take that as a yes." Mo Ran smirks against his lips as he pushes Chu Wanning to lay down on the couch, making quick work of pushing the fabric of his shirt like it offended him before he pounces on Chu Wanning's chest with as much vigor as a man dying of thirst. This gives Chu Wanning an opportunity to rake his hand along long, wavy strands, only to be stopped by a solid column that rests at the top of Mo Ran's head.

Right. He has horns now.

He briefly remembers a conversation he had with Mo Ran before the day of his death. Of how returning to Hell to acknowledge his relationship to the Demon Clan will mean that his form would change to that of a typical demon. And while Mo Ran had teased him about how Chu Wanning might like this new form a lot more than he thinks, he finds himself agreeing with his beloved, a whole three thousand years later.

Cautiously, he wraps a hand around it, testing to see if the man would feel the sensation. He got his answer in the form of a harsh suck on his nipple which causes Chu Wanning to choke out a strangled moan, tugging on Mo Ran's horn in retaliation.

When Mo Ran ceases his assault on Chu Wanning's chest, he proceeds to pepper kisses along the rest of his body instead. He starts with Chu Wanning's pale, unmarked neck, sucking a bruise on his left clavicle before his lips inch higher, traveling along his pulse point. Mo Ran stays there for a while, seemingly content with listening to the erratic beat of Chu Wanning's heart.

"You're so beautiful," he says, catching Chu Wanning off-guard. Calloused fingers trace a pattern along the bruise that he left not even a full minute ago, pressing on the inflamed skin until Chu Wanning lets

out a squeak. "Been thinking about this day for as long as I can remember, Wanning. I want to make love to you until you cry," Mo Ran lands a peck on both of his eyes, his forehead, his nose, purposefully avoiding his waiting mouth. "But I fear that this body is not as resilient as the last one. I have changed too, baobei."

Ah, his disciple is still as thoughtful as ever. But Chu Wanning is having none of it.

With as much confidence as he can muster, he takes a deep breath and brings a hand up to cradle his beloved's face. Dark aubergine meets splendid gold, like a motley of stars that take their place in the sky before the sun can fully set, two complementary colors creating a striking visual that takes one's breath away.

Chu Wanning loves this man. He may have forgotten all about his past for most of this new life of his, but in his heart he knew he was missing something. Or maybe he never lost something in the first place. Mo Ran's soul has been with him all along, accompanying him through the ups and downs when he himself didn't even realize it.

And when you love someone, you give it your all.

"If you stop right now, I am going to shove you back in that book where you came from," he bites back, a hint of petulance dripping in his tone.

Mo Ran obviously resists the urge to laugh and meets Chu Wanning's lips halfway.

When they part, a thin line of spit connects the flesh of their bottom lips. Mo Ran untangles himself from the hug to remove Chu Wanning's pants and underwear, sliding them down his legs before throwing them unceremoniously to an obscure corner of the room. He takes in the sight of Chu Wanning's naked body, pleased at the way it responds to his touch so positively, like an instrument that he can play to his heart's content.

Chu Wanning recalls those days very fondly. Of Mo Ran playing with his body like how Chu Wanning wields Jiuge in battle, rough and fierce. He had taken, taken, *taken*, and Chu Wanning is more than willing to give him everything that he can offer.

Satisfied by what he has seen, Mo Ran takes two fingers and gently prods the wet seam of his lips. "Suck, baobei." His voice alone is enough to trigger a drop of wetness to leak from the head of Chu Wanning's rapidly hardening cock. He wordlessly obliges, tongue lolling out to lick Mo Ran's fingers in an earnest fashion. The digits are long and thick, reaching the back of his throat with every thrust, and yet Chu Wanning takes them all, swallows around Mo Ran's fingertips until every inch of him is evenly coated.

"Fuck," Mo Ran breathes out, eyes blown wide from lust. He takes his fingers out and guides them between Chu Wanning's shaky legs. "I'm going to ruin you."

Chu Wanning can only whimper a single word. "Please."

A finger breaches his tight entrance, slow yet tinged with an ounce of impatience. Mo Ran stretches him out rather patiently, a far cry from his promise to ruin Chu Wanning just a few seconds ago. He moves slowly, getting Chu Wanning accustomed to the feeling of being stretched before a second finger joins in. Chu Wanning squirms on the plush surface of the couch when the drag of Mo Ran's fingers proves to be too much for his sensitive nerves.

The torture goes on for what seems to be *hours*. By now, Chu Wanning's hole is loose enough to take three fingers, clenching when they brush against a spot deep inside him. Mo Ran has also taken the liberty to rid himself of his clothing with only one hand, giving Chu Wanning something to anticipate.

As his eyes reach the lower region of the man's body, he stops and stares. Mo Ran's cock is at full hardness, standing proudly against his abdomen. Now Chu Wanning was indeed well acquainted with his beloved's body in his past life, but some parts of him sure have grown quite drastically. To put it mildly.

Upon noticing Chu Wanning's reaction, Mo Ran leans down to add yet another bruise to the constellation of pinks and scarlets on his pale skin. "Like what you're seeing?" he taunts, pulling his fingers out in favor of grasping his cock in his hand to give it a few firm tugs. The swollen head is a deep red color, much like the flowers and butterflies

he can weave with his bare hands. “Tell me how bad you want it, Wanning, and I might reward you.”

It’s easy, almost *too* easy for them to fall back into their usual banter, their usual dynamics. It almost feels like they haven’t been separated at all.

“I always want you, Mo Ran,” Chu Wanning says with utmost sincerity. And, as if to prove a point, Chu Wanning wraps both of his legs around the man’s middle, pulling him closer so the length of Mo Ran’s cock brushes upon his own. They groan in unison, the need to be closer than ever rapidly taking over any rational thought they might still have.

With a faint chuckle and a kiss to Chu Wanning’s lips, Mo Ran breaches the slick opening. Immediately, stars burst behind Chu Wanning’s eyelids — an explosion of pain and pleasure that leaves him gasping for air, desperate for something he can’t name. He wants everything and nothing all at once, wants for Mo Ran to completely take over and ravage him on this very couch, yet he also wants to savor the moment for as long as he can.

Chu Wanning is at a loss. Mind overridden with desire, he clings and whimpers and clenches around Mo Ran, who is just as gone as him. Their hips meet at the middle with every thrust, and each press of Mo Ran’s cock to the bundle of nerves that lies deep inside of him causes a broken sound to erupt from his lips, one that his beloved eagerly swallows.

“Missed you.” Mo Ran pairs his words with a harsh jerk of his hips, making Chu Wanning choke on his own breath, tears threatening to fall from his eyes at the rough treatment. “Missed you so fucking much. Your face, your voice, your body,” He licks the circumference of Chu Wanning’s ear as he lifts one leg up to rest it on his shoulder. “Your tight little hole that opens up around me so prettily. You’re made for my cock, right? You’re made for *me*.”

“Yes, I’m— yours, Mo Ran, I—”

A loud wail resonates throughout the room when Mo Ran pushes in as deep as he can. In his lust-filled state, Chu Wanning blindly reaches for something to hold onto, an anchor that can keep him from floating

away. He reaches up, lithe fingers lacing through Mo Ran’s hair until his fingers curl around a familiar set of horns, tugging when the cock inside him twitches. Mo Ran stays right where he is, grinding torturously slow until Chu Wanning calls out his name with a broken sob.

“I know. I know, baobei, just a little more. Look how well you’re taking me.” Chu Wanning opens his eyes — he hadn’t even realized he had them closed — to witness the tip of Mo Ran’s cock straining through his skin, forming a slight distention in his lower abdomen. How absolutely *filthy*, and yet a pleading whimper is what comes out of his mouth, clearly aroused at the notion of being filled until his body can’t handle it anymore.

They’re both close, Chu Wanning can feel it in the way Mo Ran’s hips stutter at every thrust. Sweat trickles from his neck down to his chest, weaving a path through the dips and valleys of Mo Ran’s abdomen.

“Close... Mo Ran—” The heat that has been steadily building inside of him bursts forth, waves of molten lava crashing through their intertwined bodies like the unforgiving waves in a stormy night. Chu Wanning’s mouth opens to a silent scream as he comes untouched, painting a beautiful scene that drives Mo Ran to completion immediately after him.

A strange feeling travels through Chu Wanning’s body. It feels like something inside of him *clicked* when he felt the rush of Mo Ran’s release paint his insides. He flinches when he feels a sensation on his belly, something intensely hot that is gone the moment he senses it.

“Oh.” Mo Ran is looking at something on his torso. Curious, Chu Wanning peers down as well, only to find—

The skin of his lower abdomen is glowing with a faint red light. In the middle of it lies a mark: a single haitang blossom with vines coming from both sides, looping once before they entwine in a criss-cross pattern. An eternal embrace, a symbol of their devotion to each other.

“It’s beautiful,” Chu Wanning murmurs, breaking the silence between them. Mo Ran whips his head up to look at him, eyes brimming with so much wonder and fondness that they threaten to drown Chu Wanning in their wake.

“...This must have been what they meant by ‘marks that were made from bonding with your fated pair.’” His beloved is still looking incredulously at the glowing mark, fingers tracing over each petal ever so carefully, like they will fly away if he pressed too hard. “Wanning is right. It’s really beautiful. Kinda matches us, don’t you think?”

It must be late in the afternoon by now; the two of them have become too preoccupied with remembering how it feels to just be in each other’s arms, to feel their breaths mingle with every kiss, feel their heartbeats sync as one. Chu Wanning offers a soft smile and lets all the relief and adoration pour out of him as he pulls Mo Ran down for a kiss.

When they part, Chu Wanning sees the waning sun filter through the gaps of the blinds only to land on Mo Ran’s honeyed skin. He traces it with a gentle finger, its subtle warmth reminding him of just how *real* this is — he and Mo Ran reunited once again, two puzzle pieces that found their way to each other through the very strings of fate itself.

“Yes. Yes it does.”

Just to Breathe Out

BY CHERRY

The first time it happens, Mo Ran is enraged after he lays waste to the Rufeng Sect, his burning fury all-consuming, refusing to be quenched by the blood of the cultivators he felled.

Chu Wanning destroys his own spiritual core in his effort to save the people, and Mo Ran’s mind refuses to look past how his Shizun always did the best for others, but never him. Never his own disciples.

He doesn’t register it at first. He’s standing over Chu Wanning’s unconscious form, the rage and hatred poisoning his veins like oil in water while his Shizun lies there looking pale and fragile, despite what he has just done. And what a thing he has done! Protected the entire sect and allowed people to flee, by barring Mo Ran’s way and breaking his Zhenlong Chess Formation, ultimately sacrificing his entire spiritual core in the process!

Chu Wanning, the great Beidou Immortal, would go out of his way to protect those he doesn’t even know, but couldn’t ever spare a glance to his disciple! Mo Ran hates him.

He hates him.

“Chu Wanning,” he hisses, hands balled into fists. “Why will you die for these bastards who don’t care about anything but lining their own pockets, but you will leave me to die like I am nothing to you? Why do

you sacrifice your power for these no-names, when all you ever give me is punishment and a cold shoulder? Chu Wanning... I hate you so *much*."

It hits him then; a blow to his chest that threatens to send him reeling, and he has to force himself to remain tall. The feeling of something *sharp* creeps up his throat, and for a second he thinks he's going to vomit from his anger. But the coughing overtakes him before he can suppress it, and his chest burns, sharp and horrifying. Before he can realise what's happening, Song Qitong is there, fussing over him, propping him up because he's seconds away from toppling.

Mo Ran retches, and briefly he thinks that Chu Wanning has cast some final spell, even in his unconscious state. His anger reaches its boiling point; as burning as the fire in his lungs. After a few minutes it begins to pass, and as the painful feeling recedes, he's able to straighten a little and catch his breath.

"Mo Weiyu," Song Qitong says, and it's the tone in her voice that tears his eyes from Chu Wanning.

"What?" he snaps.

When she points, he wipes his mouth roughly with the back of his hand.

At first, he thinks it's a smear of blood. Redder than maple, the little petal sits against his skin, as innocuous as a stone on the footpath. He vaguely registers a sound from Song Qitong, but he brushes it off, and tosses the bruised petal aside so that he can turn back to Chu Wanning, who is beginning to look too pale.

"It's nothing," he says harshly. "Take him away."

The second time it happens, Mo Ran is infuriated. He is always infuriated, but this time, the rage chokes him enough that he retches red smears while Chu Wanning watches him silently, his eyes full of loathing.

Mo Ran knows what this is. This affliction that has embedded itself in his lungs, flowers choking him with their beauty, taking his air from him because he dares to feel. Of course he knows what it is; he is the Emperor Taxian-jun, and Taxian-jun is not an idiot.

This is the curse that kills, one flower at a time, because he once dared to love. And Taxian-jun knows why it has started to grow within him now. He knows, and he is enraged, because he can do nothing about it save letting it fester like an open wound. His love for Shi Mei can never be returned, after all; Shi Mei is dead, it's Chu Wanning's fault, and Mo Ran will never be able to rid himself of the curse by way of having his love returned.

He will suffer his love for Shi Mei, and he will wear it as a reminder, until the day that he can rip the flowers from his body.

"This is your fault," he hisses at Chu Wanning, once the wave has subsided. "This is all your fault, Wanning."

Chu Wanning's eyes are red rimmed, and his face twists, but still he says nothing. He just watches as Mo Ran paces back and forth, ranting and raving. The Red Lotus Pavilion is trashed under Mo Ran's strides, debris and long abandoned projects strewn about the place in a miserable echo of Mo Ran's fractured mind.

He hates Chu Wanning so much. It consumes him, body and soul.

It happens more often, as time goes on.

They are still little more than little smears of spidery petals, but the waves take him over with no rhyme or reason, until he's on edge as much about the disease as he is about everything else around him. He visits Shi Mei's memorial in a desperate attempt to ease the cloying pain, but it never does.

He just gets angrier.

Shi Mei has abandoned him to this, and Mo Ran has no way to fix it.

After he rescues Chu Wanning from his frozen vigil at the entrance to Wushan Palace, the pain comes so fiercely that Mo Ran is forced to place him on his bed and double over for a few moments, petals and half formed blooms cascading from his mouth in bloody clumps. He doesn't know whether he's spitting more flowers than blood, and his vision hazes as he drags in deathly, rattling breaths, the air forcing its way around the plants that have taken root in his lungs.

When Mo Ran takes Chu Wanning back from the water prison and tends to him, the hacking serves to remind him of his hatred by over-

taking him, spilling blood red spider lily petals everywhere. He drags Chu Wanning inside and warms him up, tending to the wounds left in his hands by that harpy he married, and the pain in his chest is like knives seeping through his ribs. Every moment he spends with Chu Wanning brings on the attacks, and Mo Ran can only conclude that being around someone he hates so much just makes him think of the one he loves.

Being around Chu Wanning makes him miss Shi Mei and his gentle smiles and soft words, and that is what brings on the attacks.

The petals are beginning to grow thicker, far too soon for his liking. At first, they were one or two here and there, hacked up in a fit of coughing that made him feel like his breath had been robbed. Little smears of blood dot his hand, as red as the morning sun, and he is able to brush them off like they matter less to him than the worms on the path in front of him. Now they're unable to be ignored, and unable to be hidden from anyone who may see them. It's impossible to mistake what they are, even as he hacks and wheezes his way back from the Water Prison, an unconscious Chu Wanning in his arms.

When Chu Wanning rouses, Mo Ran hides his face in his stomach, and says that he is the only one who is allowed to hurt Chu Wanning.

His only answer is silence.

Liu-gong has caught wind of his affliction.

Not that Mo Ran ever tried to hide it, but the old slave either is oblivious as he seems or has been tactfully keeping silent until he can't anymore.

He catches Mo Ran the morning after he has locked up his hateful concubine, preparing to lay siege to Taxue Palace and end them all — including his cousin. Chu Wanning threatened his own death, and Mo Ran won't hear of it. Chu Wanning's life is Mo Ran's to do with as he pleases, and not even Chu Wanning has a say in that.

The wave comes as he is leaving Red Lotus Pavilion. It catches him so fiercely that he can't walk; he doubles over on the path and heaves, breath gone and vision darkening with pain like he hasn't yet felt. For a second, he thinks Xue Meng *has* found a way to finish him, because

it feels like he is dying, and Mo Ran can only lament that he hasn't outlived his Shizun.

A gentle hand rests on his shoulder as he's spilling spider lilies all over the path, and the touch is enough to shock him out of it and knock the hand away.

"Your Majesty," Liu-gong says softly. "You are ill."

"This Venerable One does not get *ill*," Mo Ran says, but even to his own ears it sounds pathetic. "This is a minor inconvenience at best."

"It is the Love Curse," Liu-gong continues boldly, despite the fact that Mo Ran is clearly in no mood to hear him. "The curse of one who—"

"I know what it is!" Mo Ran rounds on Liu-gong, who takes a step back, but doesn't shrink or cower. Mo Ran should kill him for that. "Do you think this Venerable One so uncultured that he has never heard of this curse? Do you dare question my education?"

"No, Your Majesty."

Mo Ran wipes his mouth, the pain beginning to ease now that he has his breath back. He expects that to be the end of it, but the stubborn old slave has never known when to drop a subject, and it's only his mulishness that has Mo Ran keeping him alive.

"I can help you remove it."

The laugh that erupts from Mo Ran's mouth is deranged. "You can't. Shi Mei is dead."

"There are other ways to cure the disease."

Mo Ran pauses. Turns, and stares at Liu-gong, who is watching him with a sad gaze. "How?"

Liu-gong tells him. And at first, Mo Ran wants to kill him for daring to suggest such a thing — for even implying he could live without his love, even if his love is dead? What world would be worth living in, if he has nothing but his hatred and the burned remains of his sect? His memory of Shi Mei is the only reason he gets up in the morning — his need to avenge him, and his desire to see the world burn for caring so little about his loss.

No, Mo Ran refuses to have the flowers stripped from his lungs. He will not give up his memories, even if it kills him. Liu-gong accepts his refusal, even if his expression is sober, and he never brings it up again.

When Chu Wanning dies, the first fully formed spider lily falls from Mo Ran's mouth onto his blood smeared face, a shock of colour on skin so pale that Mo Ran can only stare at it through his swimming vision. It's the colour of blood — of hatred and love and passion and power, and it lays across Chu Wanning's lifeless skin like it belongs there, where there is no love, no life, no passion. Where there's nothing.

Chu Wanning is dead.

He's dead, and Taxian-jun can't stop the onslaught of attacks, or the pain that wrenches apart his chest and renders him all but useless. It burns, and he swears that he can *feel* the tendrils of roots digging deeper into his lungs; burrowing into his ribs to keep themselves sturdy and strong. He can't stop the way the pain rips through his body, the burning that tears at his throat as flower after flower rains from him.

It's all he can do to get Chu Wanning's lifeless body back to the Red Lotus Pavilion. And it takes him three days to be able to work up the strength to preserve his body once the attacks finally subside.

Chu Wanning is dead, and Mo Ran is losing time.

He perfects the art of suppressing the attacks, when Chu Wanning is dead and gone. Using his own spiritual energy and the force of his own will, he is able to hold off the attacks and slow the advancement of the disease. Because if Chu Wanning's death has given him anything, it's the freedom to do exactly what he wants without having to endure those miserable glares; those baleful eyes that always look to him with such disappointment and sadness.

Taxian-jun has nothing *but* time now, when it had seemed to be closing in around him while Chu Wanning was alive.

So he uses it to continue sacking the cultivation world, and suppressing the disease.

And no one else knows. No one else outside his own court learns of his ailment, and if any of his servants look like they want to squeal, he dispatches them.

It doesn't stop the rumours though. That the mighty Emperor is slowly losing himself to insanity (if he wasn't already insane enough). That he's consumed by illness, driven mad by the death of his empress

and favoured concubine. That he stays holed up inside Sisheng Peak because he doesn't have the strength to leave anymore.

Not that anyone is willing to test that theory.

Fools, all of them.

Mo Ran pays the rumours no mind, and works on suppressing the disease now that he feels clear-headed enough to do so — clear-headed now that Chu Wanning is gone. He can't reverse the damage already done, but he can slow it down enough that when the attacks do come, they don't last as long.

But the disease still advances.

Slowly, like a poison spreading through him, the flowers take over. And as much as he learns to suppress; as much as he learns to weather the storm, Mo Ran cannot escape his fate. And when he visits Chu Wanning's pristine, sleeping form in the Pavilion, and looks at him with spider lilies choking his chest and throat, he suddenly finds that he really... doesn't want to.

He is tired.

Mo Ran is so, so tired of fighting.

So he stops suppressing it.

When Xue Meng breaks into Sisheng Peak with his army of cultivators, there is no chance for him to have his last words with his cousin. In fact, Taxian-jun is nowhere to be found, and scouring the peak reveals only the graves of his mother, Consort Chu, and the memorial for his martial brother, which is covered with wilted red spider lilies.

Xue Meng stares at the graves, his throat tight. There's another one there, dug and marked, but it remains open, empty. The one who should be buried there among what had once been his family is nowhere to be found.

There's a call from the main hall, and Xue Meng makes his way back there, feeling hollow and empty. Like this has all been nothing but a waste, without any sweetness to even out the bitter ending.

He knows what's in there, after all. He had seen it when he'd barged through the doors, sword drawn and prepared for a fight to the death.

Compartmentalising it had been the first thing he'd done, because trying to understand what he saw was just too much in that moment, when he had needed to find his Shizun first of all.

In the main hall of Sisheng Peak, on a throne that once might have been a magnificent piece of architecture, but is now only the harbinger of bitter memories and pain, is a magnificent mound of red spider lilies sprouting from the wood itself. They spill over the edge of the chair and onto the ground, looking like robes of finest silk. Or rivers of the deepest of blood.

There is nothing else in the room. No Taxian-jun.

No Shizun.

Nothing but despair and isolation, and thousands and thousands of red spider lilies.

In his second life, Mo Ran had decided to try and be a better man.

Well, he'd meant to. But after waking up as his fifteen year old self, with the memories of his life as a tyrant and the rage and pain of a lifetime of hatred burning in his veins, doing so is not exactly an easy task.

But he does try.

He commits himself to his lessons more, in an effort to regain the cultivation skills he had harboured as Emperor. He listens to his Shizun more, even though the hate burns through his veins when he thinks about those cold eyes, so strong that an ache burns in his chest and he feels like he can't breathe.

He dotes on Shi Mei until everyone is sick of it, because Taxian-jun had died of the broken heart disease and Mo Ran is not going to suffer it again.

Shi Mei accepts it with grace, and the flowers don't chase Mo Ran into this lifetime.

Perhaps it's because Shi Mei is alive, so Mo Ran doesn't feel the disease consuming him like it had been when he had been Taxian-jun. That's the only reason Mo Ran can think of, at any rate. Or maybe it's the way he's more openly affectionate with Shi Mei, and Shi Mei continues to accept his advances without any indication that he dislikes it.

Mo Ran doesn't really care to think on it. He's content that Shi Mei is alive, and that he's apparently not Chu Wanning's whipping boy anymore.

Maybe his decision to be better in this life is a good one, even if he can't forget what happened in the past.

Maybe he will get another chance.

This time, Mo Ran thinks to himself, as he throws himself into his lessons, determined to prove himself as someone worth being paid attention to, he's going to do things differently. This time, he knows things will be alright.

He's sure of it.

He's sure of it.

Until it happens again.

Not with any fanfare. Not with a moment of bold and desperate declarations or with any grave danger imminent. And not even when Mo Ran is looking at Shi Mei, let alone thinking about him in any kind of fond detail.

No, the disease rears its ugly head again, when he is watching Chu Wanning play the zither.

It's such a simple thing. They have been wrapping dumplings; Xue Meng is drunk and laughing with the other disciples about something nonsensical, and Chu Wanning had gotten angry about something or other, which Mo Ran doesn't care to remember. Because it's in that moment, when Chu Wanning goes to settle behind the guqin and begins to play, that familiar feeling begins to creep into Mo Ran's chest.

The sharp, suffocating pain he remembers as well as he remembers the day Shi Mei had died in their past lives. The way that it starts at the base of his lungs when he draws in a breath, and then begins creeping its way upwards until it catches him mid inhale, choking him off with the feeling of it invading his throat. Mo Ran has to cover his mouth to let out a rasping cough, and he knows that when he pulls his hands away, he's going to see a long, thin petal.

He covers his mouth, and turns his eyes away from Chu Wanning.

What the fuck? Why are you still...?

Shi Mei is beside him, watching him with concern. Of course he is, he's so sweet and gentle that he would immediately recognise Mo Ran's discomfort, and he asks softly if Mo Ran is okay.

In a panic, unable to speak for the cough he's choking back, Mo Ran flees.

He finds solitude behind the pavilion, where the light doesn't reach and he's out of earshot of anyone else. And there, the coughs wrack him, bending him double until he almost vomits, and when he draws his hand away they're there, mocking him, reminding him that not even death at their hands will spare him.

Spider lily petals.

"Fuck," Mo Ran rasps. Tosses the petals aside, and tries to straighten. "*Fuck.*"

He's not ready for this. He's not ready to examine his feelings for Shi Mei in any serious capacity. Shi Mei deserves more than Mo Ran's dirty, tainted affections, and Mo Ran hasn't seriously thought about confessing to him until now. He's been content to admire Shi Mei from a distance, like he always had, because the thought of tainting Shi Mei with his influence is too much.

And now Mo Ran may have to, because he has no other choice. If he doesn't say anything, he will die.

Mo Ran doubts he will get a third chance to right all of his wrongs if it comes to that.

For days it sits on the edge of his tongue. For days, Mo Ran thinks about how he might pull Shi Mei aside and confess to him, and tell him everything. He pictures it so clearly in his head that he isn't confronted at all by the disease again, and he reads that as a sign that he should do it.

But Shi Mei glides along, beautiful and oblivious and so, so fragile, that Mo Ran just. Can't do it.

Not right now.

He can't ruin such beauty and grace with his dirty hands.

Maybe when they're older, or when Mo Ran is on death's door and has no other choice, he might think about it again. When he's proven himself as someone of Shi Mei's affections.

Yes... yes, that's it. He will prove himself — he will be a good, smart and educated man worthy of someone like that, and when he achieves that status, *then* he will confess. When he's worthy of love from a pure and good person, he will will away the disease.

Until then, it will be a reminder, buried in his ribs, striving him forward until he becomes that which he aspires.

He can suppress it, until then. Use his newly burgeoning cultivation skills to hold it back. He's managed before — this will be child's play to manage it again, and no one will ever have to know.

Except that he underestimated how much of a *busybody* his Shizun is.

Chu Wanning discovers him, hunched over and riddled with wheezes so painful they burn, after a sparring session when they were being taught the finer art of swordplay.

It's nothing serious that sets it off this time. Just a lingering look too long on Shi Mei's look of immense concentration, and Chu Wanning dragging Mo Ran's attention away to demonstrate a particular set of moves, and suddenly he can't breathe.

He has to make some excuse to leave, because he can't let any of them see it. Mo Ran slips into the forest behind their little training field, and shoves his fist in his mouth while he tries to weather through the pain.

Suppressing the coughs is getting easier as his cultivation grows, but in exchange that terrible burn has gotten stronger, like his ribs are twisting into pieces, and it renders him useless for the few moments that it grabs him. Mo Ran can't keep a straight face when it comes on, so he flees, because there isn't anything else that he can do.

No one has followed him before. He's managed to keep it secret, and it's been weeks since the disease first began tormenting him again. Mo Ran doesn't even think that his new secret will be discovered, so he doesn't bother to go too far into the trees.

Until he's found.

He's still in the grip of the pain when he registers the sound of soft footfalls. It's all but impossible to straighten, but he manages, though his body screams in protest and petals sit in the back of his throat like vomit creeping up his neck.

Chu Wanning's gaze is sharp, as astute as ever. It only takes one assessing glance at Mo Ran for him to know that something is up.

"Mo Ran?"

He can't speak, afraid that if he does, he'll end up spitting up the blood red petals he's trying to repress, so he just waves his hand in an effort to make it seem like he's fine. Of course, Chu Wanning is far too clever to fall for such a weak attempt at diversion.

"Mo Ran, what's the matter?"

Mo Ran shakes his head again, but the pain only gets worse.

It's only by sheer, absolute force of will he manages to straighten, draw in a wheezy breath, and give Chu Wanning a brittle smile. Phoenix eyes are narrowed in concern, and his mouth is a thin line — Chu Wanning doesn't believe him for a second. But Mo Ran has never had trouble getting people to believe him.

"It's fine, Shizun," he says, and congratulates himself that his voice sounds steady. "Just a bout of pain. I must have been struck awkwardly by Xue Meng when we sparred. It's gone now."

Dark eyes are fixed on him. His words do nothing to sway Chu Wanning's concern, but Mo Ran doesn't care. There are things he needs to think about now, and wasting time being belittled by his Shizun is not part of his plans.

"Thank you for checking on me, Shizun," Mo Ran offers him a hasty bow. "I need to go and finish our lesson. I'll go first."

Without giving Chu Wanning a chance to answer him, Mo Ran hurries away, unable to escape the prickling feeling of his stare, and the lingering burn in his lungs.

It advances slower this time. Perhaps because Shi Mei is alive and well in this life, but Mo Ran is only wracked by the disease every so often, and he is able to suppress it with iron resolve. He has it firmly under

control, so he likes to think, and so he carries on without much incident.

Except for when he doesn't. And when it does come on, the disease is crippling, bending him double and robbing his breath until tears sting his eyes and he's sure he's going to die on the spot. He remembers this from the last life; he'd died from this in the last life, but he doesn't remember it feeling like this. He doesn't remember such mind numbing pain, or the feeling like his lungs are going to crawl from his body. He doesn't remember wishing he would die with every single attack.

Chu Wanning eventually finds out. Of course he does.

He knows something is up; he'd seen Mo Ran in the trees after their sparring session, and because he is relentless and nosy and can't just leave Mo Ran alone for once, he finds out.

They're at an inn in a small town at the base of the mountain, making their way towards their next task to help quell a village of a restless ghost. Shi Mei had stayed behind to work on his own studies, so it's just Xue Meng, Chu Wanning and Mo Ran this time, which makes for both relentless entertainment and unbearable company.

Mo Ran can't exactly remember what it is he's needling Xue Meng about when it comes on. But he is leaning on the table, grinning at his cousin when the server arrives to take their order. Mo Ran is content to eat anything, so he doesn't speak up right away. But he's caught by surprise when Chu Wanning suggests one of the spiciest dishes on the menu — because, Mo Ran can remember the way phoenix eyes had slid to him and then flitted away just as quickly — Mo Ran likes spicy food.

His mind flashes of its own accord back to delicately crafted wontons and Shi Mei's soft smile, and then the telltale burning starts in his chest.

The ember simmers like an aura — a warning that an attack is coming, and when the dish is placed down and Chu Wanning serves some out into his bowl, the ember becomes a nightmare.

He has to excuse himself in such a hurry that not even Xue Meng can make a snide remark about being unable to handle the heat. And Mo Ran doesn't make a beeline for the room he's to share with his

cousin — he bolts outside, hurtles around the back of the little inn and into the darkness beyond the perimeter of the town, while that feeling creeps up his throat and threatens to suffocate him.

And he doesn't have the fortitude in his rush to get away, to hold back the spasms as they take hold and bend him double while he tries to dislodge the *thing* gripping his chest.

"Mo Ran?"

He wants to say get away, get back inside. Wants to tell Chu Wanning to leave him alone and that this will pass, and beg him not to see because this is too painful and humiliating to bear alongside Chu Wanning's scathing remarks. He doesn't want to know what Chu Wanning has to say about him being caught in the clutches of a disease like this, like some pitiful lovesick fool.

Ha! Like Chu Wanning would even know what love is!

But all that comes out when he tries to speak is a faint wheeze that burns his chest, and before he can do anything to stop it, Chu Wanning is there, propping him up, his expression stricken.

"Mo Ran, what is — ?"

He can't talk. His throat is gagged with the pain of near fully formed flowers, and he has to concentrate to hold it back.

One escapes anyway, when Mo Ran manages to draw in a rattling breath just as spots gather on his vision. He can feel the moment Chu Wanning recognises the flower expelled from Mo Ran's mouth in a blood red streak.

Chu Wanning stills. So still that for a second he could be mistaken for one of the golems he spends hours upon hours on perfecting alone in his pavilion.

There is a sharp intake of breath — Mo Ran doesn't know whether it belongs to him or Chu Wanning.

It hurts. *It hurts.*

The pain overrides everything else. It claws up his neck and sprawls across his back like someone is digging knives in between his ribs, except these aren't knives because he's felt them before, and they won't stop once they've reached the limits of their endurance. They'll keep

growing, keep twisting, bending his ribs and his spine and ripping their way out of his skin until there's nothing left.

He can hardly see through it as the pain wracks him again, reminding him how little control he has over this situation.

There's a warm hand on his chest. He can faintly register the sound of a harsh reprimand, though the futility of that makes him want to laugh. He would, if he could draw in a breath.

Light bursts across Mo Ran's vision, startling him, making him hiss as his eyes burn with it, and in an instant the pain is lessened and his throat is cleared of the obstruction.

He draws in a rattling breath, and it *comes* — not free by any means, and not easy, but he can breathe.

Opening his eyes, his vision hazily focuses on Chu Wanning leaning over him. Chu Wanning still has hold of him where he had collapsed in the dirt, but his eyes are closed in concentration, the spiritual energy pouring into Mo Ran warming him and easing the pain.

Slowly, but all too surely, the pain begins to ease. The deathly rattle eases from Mo Ran's breathing, and his vision begins to clear moment by moment, until Chu Wanning withdraws his hand and takes a steadying breath, leaving silence in its wake.

Mo Ran opens his mouth to ask, but before he can, swift fingers jab at his forehead, and the world descends into darkness.

When he comes to, he's lying in bed. He's been stripped of his outer robe and his hair is loose. There's a light sheet over him. All this means that someone has taken the time to undress him, make him comfortable, and tuck him into bed — a process that wouldn't have exactly been fast.

Which means Mo Ran has been out for a while.

But what is most apparent to him, once his mind is able to focus on something that isn't superficial, is the fact that he can... *breathe*.

Air is moving through his body without any impediment. There is no pain, there's no rattle, and there's no effort. He doesn't feel like there is a permanent itch at the back of his throat, or like he's forever choking back something that is forcing its way out.

It feels like... the disease is gone.

Mo Ran pulls himself up with a groan. Glancing around, he determines he's in his own room in the inn. There's no one else here.

But before he can so much as begin to panic about it, the door slides open, and Chu Wanning steps through, gingerly carrying a bowl of something steaming.

He pauses, like he's been caught in a trap when he spots Mo Ran sitting up, but he doesn't stop to reprimand him, like Mo Ran had thought he would. Instead, he breezes over to the bed and sits the bowl down beside it, before helping Mo Ran to sit into a more comfortable position.

"How are you feeling?" The question is brusque, matter of fact.

There's a sour note on Mo Ran's tongue at that tone. "I'm fine," he says, because he doesn't know what else to say. He *is* fine. There's no pain, no flowers, and he has no idea what happened.

Chu Wanning picks up the bowl, stirring. At a glance, Mo Ran realises it's a clear broth. Chu Wanning lifts the spoon up and holds it out to Mo Ran, who, unthinkingly, leans forward and slurps the broth straight from it. It's only after he does so that he realises that Chu Wanning probably expected him to take the spoon from him.

Oh well.

"How long have you been suffering?" Chu Wanning asks, in lieu of remarking on the fact that he shouldn't be feeding his disciple like this. He takes another spoonful and holds it out.

The broth tastes fine, so Mo Ran accepts more, while mulling his answer over in his head.

How much should he reveal? Chu Wanning obviously already knows what's going on, and he doesn't seem inclined to leave until he has his answers. Will he sit there and patiently wait until he gets them, or will he demand them? Will he rip them out of Mo Ran using Tianwen?

He goes cold at the feeling. Chu Wanning wouldn't, would he...?

"Mo Ran?"

Shaking himself out of those thoughts, Mo Ran accepts another mouthful of broth.

"Since I was..." *since I woke up in this life. And before. So many years before.* "Fifteen."

There's a soft intake of breath, and when Mo Ran looks up, he can see the way Chu Wanning looks stricken. It's an unexpected look, and it cows him from saying anything more.

"That long? And you never said anything?"

"I've learned to suppress it."

"But it is still advanced. It nearly killed you, Mo Ran. I've never seen it so advanced, not in anyone, especially not someone so young."

Mo Ran's head snaps up. "You've seen this before?"

"Don't interrupt," Chu Wanning snaps, but then his expression softens when he sees the way Mo Ran flinches. "Yes. I've seen it before. An older woman, who married a man for the sake of her family, but loved someone else. By the time I was able to see to her, she was bringing up fully formed peonies. But this... I could see the stalks of those spider lilies in your mouth, Mo Ran. It looked like it was ripping you apart from the inside."

It was.

Mo Ran shudders. The broth doesn't taste so good anymore. "What did you do to stop it?"

"I placed a seal on it," Chu Wanning answers. He goes back to stirring the broth, noting that Mo Ran's appetite is quelled for now. "It won't hold forever. It's not strong enough when the disease is so advanced. But it's forced it back enough so that you are able to continue your normal life for a time, until you decide what to do."

Right. Mo Ran knows what he means by that. He remembers from *before*. His old slave had talked him through his options when he was Taxian-jun, and Mo Ran had laughed at the bitter irony of it. *Confess to your true love, or have the flowers — and all feelings, memories and desires of your true love — removed.*

One option left him without any love, or even mildly fond feelings for Shi Mei, and the other was impossible, because Shi Mei was dead. So Mo Ran had decided to live with it until it killed him, because the thought of being indifferent to Shi Mei was worse.

"Until I decide what to do," he echoes.

In this life, the decision is the same. But different. Because one option isn't impossible any more — he can confess, if he wants to, and maybe Shi Mei will feel the same, and he will be cured of the disease and live his life free and happy with Shi Mei by his side, the way he had always dreamed.

But the vision of it in his mind is distorted, and Mo Ran can't understand why. The thought of confessing his feelings to Shi Mei — no longer feeling like Mo Ran would be sully his martial brother's purity — somehow feels... wrong.

"I can take you to Tanlang Elder," Chu Wanning is saying when Mo Ran zones back into the present. "He will be able to remove the infestation if you choose that option. You can—"

"No." The words are out before Mo Ran even registers he's said them, and he shoves backwards, away from Chu Wanning. He doesn't know why, but the prospect of losing all of his feelings, regardless of what they may be or who they're directed to — it's abhorrent. It sits in his gut like oil on water. He wants to vomit with the thought of it. It's a far more visceral reaction than he had ever had before when considering it, and it startles them both as he hunches against the head of the bed, breathing rapidly.

Chu Wanning is sitting stiffly, watching him with a cold expression. "You would rather die?"

Mo Ran draws in a rattling breath. It doesn't hurt.

He says nothing.

Chu Wanning nods once, and places the half finished broth down, dusting off his knees before he stands. He looks irate for some reason, but Mo Ran has never been able to get a proper read on him, so he simply stares, and breathes.

"If that's your choice," Chu Wanning says, and his voice is glacial. "Then I will not interfere. The seal will need reinforcing periodically, until it no longer holds."

He turns and sweeps from the room before Mo Ran can even register that he's screwed up somehow.

Mo Ran recovers reasonably quickly now that he can breathe. He's able to emerge from his room the following day, and he, Chu Wanning and Xue Meng set off again for the village to complete the task given to them by Xue Zhengyong.

It goes smoothly. Mo Ran marvels at how much easier everything has just become with the seal suppressing the flowers. Nothing is painful, he's able to move freely and use his weapons effortlessly when attacked by a vicious ghost, and he doesn't need to spend hours catching his breath afterwards. He'd had no *idea* how difficult life had become for him until he had learned to breathe again, and part of him recognises that he has Chu Wanning to thank for that.

Chu Wanning had intervened and placed the seal without ever being asked, because he had recognised what was going on and knew that Mo Ran would die if he didn't. Really, his Shizun had saved Mo Ran's life.

A curl of warmth unfolds in Mo Ran's belly when he thinks of it.

Which just confuses the hell out of him.

When they return to Sisheng Peak, Shi Mei greets them and remarks at how much brighter Mo Ran looks when Mo Ran bounds up to him to say hello. Mo Ran almost blurts it out right there, but something stops him, and he simply grins like a fool and thanks him.

If he's going to confess, it needs to be done right. Shi Mei deserves more than a garbled splatter of words that are forced out unexpectedly.

Mo Ran begins to plan.

It should be easy. It should be the easiest thing he's ever done, really, because the alternative is to die.

But Mo Ran doesn't figure out how he's to confess, because every time he thinks on it, his body wants to rebel. That oil that sits in his gut churns until he forces himself to think on something else, and the feeling fades again. Mo Ran doesn't understand why, but he really can only come to the conclusion that he's just not meant to. Not yet, at least.

Chu Wanning continues to reinforce the seal over the disease. He doesn't ask if and when Mo Ran has made up his mind — doesn't ask for anything besides how Mo Ran is feeling when he trudges into the

Red Lotus Pavilion to have his chest cleared away of the encroaching flowers. He doesn't ask who the object of Mo Ran's desires even are, and Mo Ran is honest with him besides that.

So time passes, and Mo Ran is able to live with the disease, no one else besides his Shizun aware of what is slowly growing in him. But as time does continue, Mo Ran finds he is needing to visit Chu Wanning more and more often.

And he has to make his way up to the Pavilion more frequently, which eases the pain even before he gets there, as though anticipating where Mo Ran is going.

"You need to stop doing this. It will kill you." Tanlang Elder's voice is flat, and it halts Mo Ran in his tracks where he stands.

He's been making his way into the Pavilion sooner than planned — only a few months after the seal was last reinforced — which is how he overhears the conversation. And he pauses, momentarily torn about whether to turn around and come back later, or whether he should stop and listen like the nosy part of him always wants to.

Something is killing his Shizun.

Anger roils under his skin before he can stop it — an ancient feeling that he hasn't had since his previous life. The feeling of rage that someone might have the gall to hurt or injure his Shizun. *His* Shizun. It's familiar, and it's burning.

Something in Mo Ran shifts, almost unnoticed.

There's a moment of silence. Then, Chu Wanning's voice. "It's necessary."

"Just tell me who it is, won't you? I can help them, and then you can stop doing this to yourself."

There's no response. Silence falls, and Mo Ran senses the hum of energy in the air — spiritual energy. Tanlang Elder is...? Healing Chu Wanning?

"You're aware that if you keep doing this, it's going to take root. Then no one will be able to stop it because you've brought it on yourself. Is that what you're trying to do? Be a martyr or something? Trying to prove a point?"

Chu Wanning only offers a faint "hm," in response. Tanlang Elder is clearly making about as much progress as a fern leaf against a brick wall.

"Your students will be miserable if they lost you to something like this. Think of them at least, won't you?"

"I *am* thinking of them." The anger in Chu Wanning's tone is surprising. "If you're going to lecture me every time I come here then you can forget about these sessions. I will manage on my own."

There's a beat of silence. "It's one of them, isn't it?" The realisation in Tanglang Elder's voice is awful. "You're healing one of them at the expense of yourself. Does he know that you're doing this? That you might be taking the flowers away from him, but that you're only absorbing it yourself? Yuheng, I don't believe any of your disciples would be happy to see that this is what you're doing to heal them."

Healing one of them... at the expense of yourself.

Healing one of his disciples by absorbing their disease into himself.

...

It hits Mo Ran like a thunder strike.

Chu Wanning had been absorbing the malevolent energy of the curse into himself all this time, accepting the flowers, choking off his own lungs. All the while telling Mo Ran that he was placing a seal on the disease, that there was nothing else that needed to be done aside from these regular sessions, until Mo Ran could decide what to do.

He'd been lying.

The whole time, Chu Wanning had been taking the disease into his own lungs to incubate, and suffered in Mo Ran's stead for his indecision.

Why?

Why would Chu Wanning do such a thing to himself?

Mo Ran doesn't know whether to feel furious or touched. He thinks he's mostly furious, but there's something else in his belly that's stirring, only he's too much of a dumb brute to be able to figure out what that means.

And because he's a dumb brute, he marches right into the pavilion without caring about the fact he's breaking several rules in doing so.

"Is that true?"

Tanlang Elder and Chu Wanning have been facing away from him, so they turn to him with wide eyes when he interrupts. Chu Wanning blanches when he sees Mo Ran, but Tanlang Elder stands, evidently sensing the oncoming storm.

"Mo Weiyu, what are you doing here?"

"To hell with that!" Mo Ran snarls. There's a spark of old rage in him — rage from a lifetime past that simmered for years whenever he laid eyes on his Shizun, and rose like a snake to a charmer at the drop of a coin. And it flares now, all consuming, blinding Mo Ran to any propriety or politeness as he stares a pale Chu Wanning down. "You told me you were placing seals on it! Chu Wanning, *is that true?*"

Chu Wanning is bristling despite looking small and pale on the mat, where he hasn't moved at all.

Sick. He looks sick.

"Chu Wanning!"

He wants to go to him and drag him up by the arm. Wants to shake him and demand answers, and then drag him away where no one else can lay eyes on him. Where no one else can *hurt him*, because only Taxian-jun can hurt Chu Wanning, and anyone else who thinks they have that right will meet the end of his spiritual weapon!

He'll reach in and drag those stolen flowers out *himself* if that's what it takes!

Mo Ran begins to advance, but Tanlang Elder moves in between them then, his expression cold. Mo Ran turns to glare at him, and his expression must be terrible, because for a second Tanlang Elder pauses. But it's gone almost before it can be spotted, and Tanlang Elder's eyes turn fierce.

"Who are you to speak to your Shizun like that? Do you have no manners?"

"Get out of my way," Mo Ran snarls. "You've been enabling him this *whole time*, while he's been pretending to heal me up good as new!"

A blink. "You're the one with the curse?"

Mo Ran grits his teeth. "That's not important."

"It is. There are ways that—"

"Yes, I know, there's ways that can heal me properly. I don't care about that, I care about finding out why I'm being lied to and I care about you *getting out of my way.*"

If Tanlang Elder was feeling any sympathy, it evaporates with the demand. His eyes turn cold, and even though he's facing the rage of someone who once destroyed worlds, he keeps his shoulders square and does not back down.

"I think you need a lesson in *respect*, Mo Weiyu," Tanlang remarks coldly. "I don't care how angry you are, barging in here unannounced and making demands is the behaviour of someone who was raised in a *barn*, not someone who is a respectable disciple of Yuheng Elder!"

Mo Ran wants to hit him. He could, if he were someone *else*, if he had the power to truly show Tanlang Elder just how much power could behold someone who was *raised in a barn*.

But Chu Wanning intervenes before Mo Ran's anger takes over reason, his tone harsh. "Mo Ran, be quiet!"

It serves to clear Mo Ran's head of that blinding rage somewhat, but he is still infuriated, and while he says nothing more to Tanlang Elder's rebukes, he doesn't step back, and doesn't apologise. Let Tanlang Elder think him uncivilised, Mo Ran is not here for him!

"Please leave us," Chu Wanning says to Tanlang Elder with a dip of his head.

Tanlang Elder glances between them, and then shakes his head. "This is between you two. Yuheng, consider what I said. Until then, I'll be going." With a swish of his robes, he turns and leaves the pavilion, leaving a terrible silence in his wake.

Mo Ran turns back to Chu Wanning. Chu Wanning has turned his head away, and Mo Ran can no longer see his face, but he is sitting rigidly, hands fisted on his lap, and the tension radiates from him in waves.

"Why?" It's all Mo Ran can say without exploding.

Chu Wanning takes a breath. "You were suffering."

Mo Ran explodes anyway. "That doesn't mean I wanted you to suffer instead!"

He doesn't get a response, and he wants to shake that beautiful, perfect posture out of Chu Wanning, until he can get the answers he wants. That filthy beast that had always lived under his skin is rearing its head — nearly taking over.

His breathing is beginning to hurt.

Mo Ran marches around where Chu Wanning is sitting, and stares down at him. The look on Chu Wanning's face is reminiscent of another time, when he had tried so hard to avoid showing emotion. But he wears it anyway, in the straight backed posture, in the red rimming his eyes. In the hard line of his jaw.

"What good does taking all of this into yourself *do*? What do you possibly achieve by lying and telling me you've sealed it away, when all you're doing is making yourself sick? How long were you planning on keeping this up, Shizun?"

Chu Wanning says nothing, and Mo Ran does reach him then. Boldly, baldly, he grips his shoulders tightly. Chu Wanning doesn't move.

"How long?"

"Until you made your decision," Chu Wanning finally says quietly.

"What if I never made a decision?"

"Then I'd continue."

He leaves the rest unspoken, but part of Mo Ran knows what it is anyway. *I'd continue until one of us dies.*

His stupid, selfless, beautiful Shizun.

"Shizun, why didn't you tell me?"

Chu Wanning stays silent. His expression is stony, even if his eyes are rimmed with red.

Mo Ran doesn't know who he's more angry at. Chu Wanning for sacrificing his own health for this, or himself for being stupid enough to believe a simple seal could be strong enough to prevent the disease from advancing. And when he thinks back over the time Chu Wanning has been *sealing* his illness...

Mo Ran drops to his knees in front of Chu Wanning, and reaches for his hands in a desperate attempt to get some kind of response out of him. And the anger fades into despair — that Chu Wanning would harm himself for a scoundrel like Mo Ran.

He had always wanted Chu Wanning's attention. Had always dreamed that he would turn his gaze to Mo Ran just once, to acknowledge him, to appreciate him as a disciple and a cultivator.

But not like this. Never like this.

"Shizun," Mo Ran whispers, "why?"

Chu Wanning draws in a breath, and for the first time Mo Ran can hear, *really* hear, the rattle in it. The way Chu Wanning has to work to suck in air, as though those flowers are blooming in his own chest.

"Because I cannot let you suffer," he says, his voice quiet and hard. "I won't. And if this is what I have to do, then I will do so gladly."

"Even if it's killing you?"

"No one will—" Chu Wanning's mouth snaps shut, like he spoke too soon. As if his iron control has slipped for a split second, giving Mo Ran just the tiniest glimpse at something festering.

"No one will what?" Chu Wanning doesn't answer, so Mo Ran tightens his grip on his hands. "Shizun, no one will *what*?"

Chu Wanning's shoulders are drawn up, his gaze fixed to the side, like he can pretend that if he's not looking at Mo Ran, he can make this scenario go away.

"Pay attention to me," Mo Ran snaps, the tone so cold and bitter that Chu Wanning's eyes *do* shift to him. "No one will *what*?"

Chu Wanning is staring at him, eyes wide now. Something of Taxian-jun must have slipped into Mo Ran's voice, because there's an undercurrent of something in his eyes that is neither cold indifference or an attempt at it. Mo Ran doesn't want to stop and think about it, so he draws in a — slightly rattly — breath, and wills himself to calm.

"No one will what?"

This time, after a beat, Chu Wanning does answer. And it's so unexpected that Mo Ran's balance goes, and he slips from his knees to his ass on the hardwood floor.

"No one will miss me if I'm gone."

No one will miss me.

Is that what Chu Wanning thinks? Does he *seriously* — ?

"You can't be serious," Mo Ran manages. "No one will *miss* you?"

Brilliant red colours Chu Wanning's ears, the humiliation evident in his posture and the way he now leans away from Mo Ran, like he's let out some vicious poison that hovers in the air between them. Like *he's* the poison.

"Shizun, do you have *any* idea how much we love you?"

Phoenix eyes snap back to him so fast that Mo Ran almost misses it. But as fast as it happens, they're gone, and for a split second Mo Ran thinks he saw something like... hope?

So he presses on. "Shi Mei, Xue Meng and I would be lost without you," he says, wanting to squeeze Chu Wanning's hand where he has hold of it, but deciding not to lest he ruin this moment. "You're our Shizun, you're the reason we are the cultivators that we are."

Why are Chu Wanning's shoulders dropping?

"Shizun, this whole peak would be lost without you. You really think you wouldn't be missed? I would walk through death myself to get you back if I could!"

I tried to walk through death to get you back, back then...

Chu Wanning draws in a steadying breath, and nods. "Yes, of... course."

But he doesn't look like he believes him. In fact, Mo Ran thinks Chu Wanning looks even more miserable than he had before Mo Ran spoke, and he wonders stupidly what it is that he's done wrong.

"Shizun, I... you're so important," he says. Urgency rises in him — a desire to let Chu Wanning know that he *is* special, that he would be missed, that *Mo Ran* would miss him if he was gone. "You can't do this to yourself, and I won't let you anymore. You think you wouldn't be missed, but you're so wrong. You're so important to this peak, to your disciples."

To me.

The thought gives him pause.

Yes, Chu Wanning is important to him. But... when did he become... more important than everyone else?

He can't answer that, because before he realises it, Chu Wanning is nodding, and making to rise, his face still beet red and brows furrowed. He still doesn't get it — still doesn't believe Mo Ran.

He has to make him *believe* it.

"Shizun! I won't let you die," he says, snaring Chu Wanning's hands so that they're in his grip and he can't walk away. "I can't let you die again. I won't go through it."

"Again?"

But Mo Ran just shakes his head, ignoring the slip as the past and present blur together in a miserable blend of pain and despair. "A world without you in it is a world of nothing but grey. There's so much hatred and pain and you are the one who is able to control it. You're the only important person, Wanning, no one else matters. Not me, not Shi Mei, not... not... anyone..."

Mo Ran can feel the stone settle in his gut just as the realisation clicks into place.

Not anyone.

Not even Shi Mei.

Oh...

He manages to leave the Red Lotus Pavilion before he makes a bigger fool of himself. It takes him five minutes to convince Chu Wanning that he isn't lying when he says he would be missed, and then another five to make him understand Mo Ran will *not* be allowing Chu Wanning to *seal* his illness anymore.

Chu Wanning tells him before he leaves that if the disease is left alone, he has little more than a year left to live, because it will advance at a rapid pace now as though making up for lost time.

Chu Wanning is clearly distressed by this, and Mo Ran files it away.

A year to make his decision.

A year to come to terms with what he had thought he knew.

You are the most important person, Wanning.

How long has it been Chu Wanning? Mo Ran doesn't have an answer for that, but he shuts himself in his room to brood, and allows himself to mull it over, under the excuse of not feeling well. Not that it's a lie — he is feeling drained, and miserable at everything he's learned, but...

How long?

He runs back over every single occasion he's had attacks of the disease, rolling the memories over in his mind with a comb, wanting to untangle the knots of his feelings so that he can gain some understanding.

It had resurfaced when Chu Wanning had been playing the zither. When Mo Ran was fifteen and stupid, and had still thought that he had hated his Shizun despite wanting to be a better person. He remembers that he was watching Chu Wanning play and thinking about how skilled he was, when that burning had risen in his throat.

Mo Ran had thought it was because Shi Mei was there at the time.

When Chu Wanning had been helping them make food for the new year feast, and his sad, lumpy noodles had made Mo Ran choke back a laugh, because it was so endearing and Chu Wanning had been so embarrassed, and he had felt the flowers invade his mouth.

Shi Mei had been there then too, and he'd thought it was because of that.

When they had been sparring, and Chu Wanning had first found him in the forest. He'd been watching Chu Wanning demonstrate his moves.

At the inn, when Chu Wanning had got him spicy food because he knew that Mo Ran liked spice, even though Chu Wanning couldn't stand it.

And every time before or after, every time in this life, when Mo Ran had been around Chu Wanning or thinking of Chu Wanning, the disease had caught hold of him. And Mo Ran — stupid, blind, ignorant Mo Ran, had been so wrapped up in his feelings from his previous life, that he had mistaken it.

He is such a fool.

Unbidden, Mo Ran's mind drifts back to his past life, when he was Taxian-jun. The disease had persisted then too, after Shi Mei's death. Does that mean even *then*, Mo Ran had been in love with Chu Wanning and was too stupid to realise it?

The hatred that he thought he had was not hatred at all?

But no... that can't be right. Mo Ran remembers that visceral hatred. He had felt it coat his tongue when he awoke here in this life too. It

had taken time to fade when he spent more time with his Shizun, and worked on himself in an effort to be better.

For Shi Mei, he thinks with a bitter laugh. He had tried to be better for Shi Mei.

But then as the disease advanced, the thought of Shi Mei hadn't spun his mind like it used to. Mo Ran doesn't feel that idol worship for him anymore, and the thought of saying anything genuine to him about the disease...

Something in Mo Ran's gut recoils.

It's confirmation enough, for him.

It was never Shi Mei.

Even back *then*. But why... *why* had Mo Ran hated Chu Wanning so much?

As much as this has answered questions for Mo Ran, a thousand more have surfaced; about Taxian-jun, about his past life, about his past deeds. About why he had no capacity to recognise that he loved Chu Wanning even then, and only read his intense feelings as hatred and bitterness.

Why.

All of this is so much. It's too much. He can't think about it now, or why. He can't think about anything but Chu Wanning.

That's when the curse strikes him.

With a vengeance, the flowers pierce his chest and crawl their way up his throat, and Mo Ran bends double, tears brimming in his eyes and streaming down his face as fast as the spider lilies that are finally free to do as they please.

But he knows — he knows what he has to do.

Air burns as it whistles through the miniscule spaces in his chest, the threat they pose to his life loud and clear even as Mo Ran stumbles up to make his way back to the pavilion. He can feel the flowers pushing themselves forward, desperate for this to be the time they claim him, after two lifetimes, when he slipped this fate the first time around. He remembers this feeling — remembers the pressure in his head, and in his lungs, and in his heavy limbs as he drags himself, trying to draw in the air.

Maybe he doesn't have a year left after all.

Mo Ran races back across the paths, past those endless stairs, dizziness threatening to take hold of him as spider lilies begin to spill from his mouth. They fall like rain, spattering against the path, but Mo Ran pays them no mind. He has to get to Chu Wanning.

It's dark in the Red Lotus Pavilion when he finally makes it. Chu Wanning must have decided to go to sleep in the time since Mo Ran had left, but Mo Ran doesn't stop from barging through the doors without so much as a knock.

This is a gamble like he has never taken before, and he's fairly certain that either way, it'll end in his death. Either because he's wrong, so wrong, or because Chu Wanning will kill him for what he's about to do.

He can't even feel nervous.

Chu Wanning is curled up in that tiny space on his bed when Mo Ran stumbles into his room. He jolts upright, and his expression is initially wide eyed and sleep riddled — a rare glimpse into a man with his guard down, like Mo Ran has only ever seen him a scarce few times — but it rapidly becomes hard with concern when he takes in Mo Ran's state, and he pulls himself up off the bed without Mo Ran having to say a single thing.

It's obvious why.

Spider lilies are falling from his mouth like rain now. With every breath out another one takes its place, and his vision is swimming so much that he's stumbling. He hasn't had an attack this bad in this life, and in the past they only grew this bad towards the end, when he had resigned himself to his fate. In his hazy eyes, Mo Ran sees Chu Wanning stand and make his way over, but Mo Ran doesn't quite reach him before he misplaces his step and lands hard on his knees.

"Mo Ran?" Chu Wanning's voice is pitched, the worry so evident, and part of Mo Ran wants to laugh at the fact that all this time he had thought Chu Wanning had never cared, when the opposite has always been true

He cared so much. Always so much. Enough to harm *himself* in an effort to spare Mo Ran the pain of his illness.

"Wanning," Mo Ran manages to rasp, but it's all that he can get out around another surge of lilies. God, this is just like last time, only last time he had the foresight to get himself drunk on opium so that he had barely had the mind left to suffer.

He'd thought he'd known suffering.

He'd been so stupid.

Before Mo Ran can gather himself to say anything, Chu Wanning is behind him and firm hands have jabbed at his back, and spiritual energy is flowing between them. Mo Ran tries to twist away, not wanting Chu Wanning to absorb it anymore, still steadfast on that refusal, but he doesn't have the strength to pull away when Chu Wanning just follows him.

"The disease is too advanced," Chu Wanning says, and he doesn't bother to hide the despair from his voice. "I can't seal it anymore."

Mo Ran manages to turn and snare one thin wrist in his hold. The room is spinning and he can barely draw a breath, but he sucks it in around the stems and roots and flowers that have taken his body hostage, and manages to wheeze out the only thing that matters in the world now — the only thing that he wants to say.

"Wanning, I love you."

The pain overwhelms him again, and he doesn't see Chu Wanning's expression at the declaration. He has to force himself to weather it again, and then sucks in another whistling breath. Tears blur his vision — tears at his own stupidity and his own stubbornness, and at the prospect that he's gotten this all wrong again.

"I love you," he says around the pain. "I'm sorry. It's always been you."

Chu Wanning still hasn't spoken. He's frozen in place, his face bone white.

"Mo Ran, I—"

But he doesn't hear what Chu Wanning says as blackness finally takes him, his body giving into the fight.

I love you.

Chu Wanning...

He comes to after what feels like eternity, to the dim light of a candle and pressing, suffocating silence.

There's a faint ache in his chest, and while his breathing is still heavy and harsh, he's able to get enough air again.

The attack has passed.

Blearily, Mo Ran blinks his eyes open, and gazes at the ceiling of the Red Lotus Pavilion, in Chu Wanning's chamber. On his bed.

Any other time, he might have pushed himself up in shock and a little bit of terror. But he's tucked in and warm and comfortable, and that last attack has taken his strength from him.

Memory of it comes back in pieces. But the awareness of what had transpired in the minutes before he had passed out sits at the back of his mind, turning his calm tranquility into nerves.

There's movement next to him. Turning his head slowly — painfully, because his neck is so sore — he spies Chu Wanning perched at the bedside, his face pale, his expression drawn.

Their gazes meet, and there is... silence.

Mo Ran can see the way Chu Wanning's throat bobs as he swallows. His eyes are red, and his hands are clenched on his knees, giving away the tension that he is carrying in his slender frame. He doesn't look happy, not in the slightest.

"You're awake," Chu Wanning eventually says. "I had thought for a moment there that my estimates were grossly under-calculated."

"I'm fine," Mo Ran says and his throat is like knives.

Chu Wanning nods. "Then I will find you something to eat so you can recover from the attack."

Before he can stand and walk away, Mo Ran shoots his hand out and snares Chu Wanning's wrist, anchoring him to the spot. Painfully, he pulls himself upright against Chu Wanning's protests, and manages to sit up enough that he's level with Chu Wanning.

"Shizun," Mo Ran says hoarsely. "Did you hear me before? What I said to you?"

Chu Wanning goes rigid. But he doesn't pull away from where Mo Ran still has hold on him.

"Did you hear?"

There's a beat. Two. And then, infinitesimally, Chu Wanning nods his head once. He says nothing.

The silence stretches, until it's unbearable. The weight of it settles on his shoulders like stones, until his shoulders are slumping the longer Chu Wanning is silent. But Mo Ran doesn't speak, because Chu Wanning is gazing at his hands, looking like he's trying to summon whatever it is he wants to say.

Eventually, blessedly, when Mo Ran thinks he's going to die from waiting, Chu Wanning speaks.

"I understand."

Mo Ran blinks. "Understand?"

Chu Wanning nods his head with a jerk.

"Okay... because I don't."

"You've avoided the worst of the attack now. I can't be sure whether your actions delayed the disease any, but it certainly seems to have bought you enough time to reconsider your decision not to act. Perhaps I could go and fetch Shi Mingjing—"

"Wait, what?" *What?* "Shizun, what are you talking about?"

Chu Wanning's expression is stony. "Your... declaration. Before. Seems to have done the trick and bought you some time."

Mo Ran still doesn't follow, but something in his stomach curls unpleasantly, nudging him to understand that he's on the edge of something perilous.

Clearing his throat, Chu Wanning straightens his robes and then moves to stand again. "So you may take a little longer to decide your next course of action. Though, I don't know how long this may last given how terrible that attack was, so you ought to consider your options carefully—"

"Shizun," Mo Ran interrupts. He feels cold. "Did you mistake what I told you before?"

Chu Wanning's mouth snaps shut. Red is painting his ears. "You don't need to continue. The disease is dormant again."

Continue!?

Mo Ran is so confused that he wants to hit something. "Shizun, I—"

“Mo Ran,” Chu Wanning says, his tone turning hard. “Please stop this. You don’t need to keep pretending.”

Pretend... *pretending*!??

Realisation sinks into his stomach like a stone. Like the coldest, most jagged stone in the world, grating its way down, making him feel sick.

“Shizun... do you... did you think I was *pretending* when I told you I love you?”

Chu Wanning’s silence is answer enough. His face is aflame, his eyes down, and his brows are knitted in a way that gives away his humiliation. Mo Ran leans forward and grips his other hand.

“Wanning, I wasn’t pretending,” he says, the urgency bleeding into his tone. The desire to make Chu Wanning *understand*. “It’s always been you, Wanning. I’ve only ever loved you. I was just too dumb to see it before. And... I know I’m not smart or special, it took me until today to realise it, and then the attack came on and I... I want you to know, Wanning. Even if you never feel the same, even if this changes nothing and I’m going to fall to these flowers anyway, then I’ll be alright with that. Because I love you, Wanning. Only you.”

Through both lifetimes.

Chu Wanning is staring at him. His eyes are glimmering, red tinging the corners, but his expression is still rigid. He holds himself so still he could be a statue. Mo Ran decides to throw all caution to the wind, and shifts so that he’s sitting on the edge of the bed, knee to knee with Chu Wanning, and one hand shifts from the thin wrist at his lap, to brush a thumb under his eye.

A rattling breath is drawn, but Mo Ran doesn’t know whether it comes from him or Chu Wanning. It doesn’t matter. He has to make him believe. Has to make him *see*.

Chu Wanning’s eyes flutter shut, and his breath fans across Mo Ran. Short, shuddery breaths, like he’s forgotten how.

“Wanning,” Mo Ran whispers, and he swears he can feel Chu Wanning lean into his touch just the smallest amount. “It’s always been you.”

The brush of their lips together is faint, but lingering. Chu Wanning is holding his breath as Mo Ran kisses him as softly as a butterfly’s wings, his shoulders trembling.

“I’m sorry it took me so long,” Mo Ran whispers against Chu Wanning’s lips. “But it’s true.”

Chu Wanning shudders in a breath, and Mo Ran leans back, but doesn’t pull away entirely. He watches emotion flash across Chu Wanning’s face so fast he can barely follow it, before gently unfolding one slender hand to curl their fingers together.

He waits, silent, but breath held while Chu Wanning gazes at him. While he takes in Mo Ran’s confession, and the waiting feels like a lifetime or more, but he has already spent that long blind to it. He can manage a few more moments.

“You...” Chu Wanning’s voice is hoarse. Brittle. “Love... me?”

Mo Ran lets go a breath, and nods.

“But I...”

“No buts,” Mo Ran says softly. “Just us, if that’s what you want.”

He watches Chu Wanning’s throat bob a swallow.

“Is that what you want?”

Chu Wanning’s eyes drop closed, and a crystalline tear slips from one corner, its warmth coating Mo Ran’s thumb. After another moment, Chu Wanning nods.

The effect is instantaneous.

Pain cripples him. It’s like something is being forcibly ripped from his lungs, and Mo Ran doubles over where he sits, gasping desperately, clutching at his chest and pulling at his clothes as though that will make any kind of difference. He can taste blood in his mouth, his ribs collapsing one by one, and his vision swims again.

For a moment, Mo Ran thinks he got it incredibly, stupidly wrong, and that he’s about to die here.

No, no. No, he can’t die here. Not right now, this is cruel — it’s too cruel.

And as quickly as it comes on... it’s gone.

His vision clears. Mo Ran is leaning over Chu Wanning, wrenching air into his lungs, gripping at his shoulders where Chu Wanning is clutching at his upper arms.

He’s breathing... in. And out. In... and out.

No pain.

No wheezing.

No... no flowers.

No nothing.

“Mo Ran?” Chu Wanning’s voice is stricken.

He slowly sits up, gazing up at Chu Wanning wide eyed and shell-shocked, and unable to believe that it... happened. It worked.

“It’s gone,” Mo Ran whispers. And then laughs in disbelief. “Shizun, it’s gone.”

Chu Wanning furrows a brow, and then presses one hand over Mo Ran’s chest. There’s a faint burst of spiritual energy, but it fades as quickly as it flares. And something like relief sinks Chu Wanning’s shoulders like a stone.

“It’s gone,” he echoes.

And Mo Ran can’t help himself. Laughing, he stands from the bed and pulls Chu Wanning into his arms, clinging to him like a desperate man. A man born anew, except this is the third time, a third life — a real life. Because the disease is gone. Chu Wanning loves him, and the disease is gone.

Chu Wanning loves him.

When Mo Ran kisses him this time, he doesn’t hold back. And neither does Chu Wanning. He yields almost straight away, opening his mouth to Mo Ran with a quiet sound that could be a sob or a groan, and Mo Ran pulls their bodies flush together, fingers tangling in hair he knows so well, but has never touched in this life.

“Wanning,” Mo Ran breathes against Chu Wanning’s lips, “I’m sorry I kept you waiting.”

Chu Wanning just kisses him harder, lets himself be guided around until Mo Ran is able to lower him to the bed. And when they finally come together, it’s everything Mo Ran remembers, but more. So, so much more.

Because he loves Chu Wanning.

And Chu Wanning loves him.

My Heart Remembers the Way Home

BY PURL

K*eeep breathing. Don’t stop.* It hurts, you knew it’d hurt, but you didn’t know quite how much — how it pierces not just to the bone but through it and then deeper, in all the ways a thing can hurt you. You wonder if it hurts him the same way too — then your breath catches and your voice falters, and you hope you didn’t stumble over the incantation because you know you only have one shot at this.

Breathe. You keep going. You’ve long since abandoned the pretense of fucking yourself on his cock, your legs still and tense beneath you where they straddle his waist, and you don’t think about the way you’re still joined together because this was the only way you could do this. A necessity. You couldn’t wait until he allowed himself to be unguarded — that moment may never have come. He’s always waiting for you to strike, and you’ve already taken too long. At least he’ll like this, you think, that this is how you’ll die, humiliated and compromised and—

Inhale. You can’t stop reciting the incantation. You must be precise. There’s no room for error, not when the flower in his heart has rooted so deeply, when its tendrils have made a home in his soul. Pulling this weed from him will take everything you have. You try not to take anything from him, too. His heart beats beneath the sweat-sticky palm of your hand and you hope it stays strong. You hope you’ve done enough.

You've done all you can.

Chu Wanning, don't you dare—

Exhale. Then nothing.

The sunlight streaming through tree branches cast a mottled pattern on the stone path of Naihe bridge, its shape ever-changing in the steady breeze. It glanced off of Chu Wanning's disciples as they ran ahead, heedless of their stations, locked in a meaningless argument.

If Chu Wanning tried, if he set aside all the memories of the past few years and let time turn back, he could pretend he was once again nothing more than an elder of Sisheng Peak, spending the afternoon watching his two reckless disciples mess around.

But the present day demanded a heavy toll, and it always came back for its due. Chu Wanning watched as Mo Ran nearly careened into that toll head-first, but he skidded to a halt just before the delicate figure draped in ostentatious fabrics and jewels, her painted face radiant while she hid an intentionally graceful laugh behind the back of her hand.

And suddenly, there was no mistaking how distant the days Chu Wanning remembered were. Song Qitong, empress and Mo Ran's wife, could never fit into his memories of before.

Xue Meng fell back, slowing down to reach Chu Wanning's side, looking on helplessly as the emperor of the cultivation world was pulled away by his giggling wife. Xue Meng and Mo Ran shared an uneasy truce, sometimes falling back into the familiar patterns of childhood when left alone together — but it was quickly dashed by Song Qitong's intrusion, and Chu Wanning knew Xue Meng would be moody now he was reminded of all that still stood between them.

"I don't know why she looks so happy." Xue Meng grumbled, kicking a stone and crossing his arms over his chest. "What's she got to smile about? It's not like she's pregnant yet."

As they walked side-by-side over the bridge, Chu Wanning kept his gaze fixed forward and his chin raised, but his eyes flitted over to glance at Xue Meng.

Xue Meng didn't notice. "They say Mo Ran doesn't even spend his nights at her residence. Ugh." An exaggerated tremor of disgust shook Xue Meng's shoulders. "I don't want to think about it."

"Then don't." Chu Wanning wasn't particularly fond of the topic either. Choosing not to mind it was an easy solution.

"Does he not want an heir, or something?" Xue Meng mused. "And whatever happened to his concubine? I thought he spent all his time with her, but no one knows where she is anymore. None of the servants even act like they know she exists if you ask them about it. It's just — it's weird, right?" Xue Meng halted mid-stride, raising a hand. "Wait!" His eyes widened in thought. "Do you think she's pregnant?"

Chu Wanning choked on a startled cough. "What?"

"The concubine," Xue Meng explained helpfully. "Maybe she's pregnant, and that's why no one's seen her in ages, because Mo Ran's worried the empress would try to..."

Chu Wanning had heard enough. "Xue Ziming," he said, his voice as cold and sharp as the edge of a blade, cutting off Xue Meng's nonsense conjecture. "I didn't realize you were so taken with gossip these days."

"Ah, Shizun..." Xue Meng ran a sheepish hand over the back of his head.

"Would you like to interrogate the servants further to get some more information about the emperor's personal affairs? Or should we discuss the recent affairs of Mei Hanxue? I'm sure there's something salacious enough there to keep your attention."

Xue Meng looked at the ground, his expression hardening. It settled against the harsh line of his scar, giving a heavy weight to his seriousness. "Mei Hanxue doesn't mess around anymore. He hasn't, not since... well."

Chu Wanning's chest tightened uncomfortably. Of course. He was always saying the wrong thing. Not that he was ever good with his words, but so much had changed in the years he spent sequestered away under Mo Ran's control.

No one judged him for it anymore, but the look of pity washing over Xue Meng's face was unbearable. Chu Wanning wasn't sure if it was any better to be a thing treated delicately, like some old porcelain decoration easily shattered, handed down and kept out of obligation. In the end, the result was the same. He was a relic of what their lives were before everything burned, when Hua Binan wielded Mo Ran as a weapon for his own gains to tear down the foundations of life as they knew it. Chu Wanning no longer belonged here.

"Have you told Mo Ran about your plans, yet?" Xue Meng asked, a clumsy attempt to change the subject.

"No."

"Oh." Xue Meng trailed after Chu Wanning, resuming the leisurely pace of their stroll. "Have you changed your mind?" He sounded hopeful.

"No."

"I still don't think you should go." Xue Meng frowned. "We need you here."

"To do what?" Chu Wanning asked, letting the skepticism show in the arch of his eyebrows. "I'm not part of the royal court. I have no cultivation to offer. You've both grown far past requiring the guidance of a teacher to succeed."

"No, that's not... you're wrong. Shizun, we can't do this on our own." Xue Meng's voice was so small. It was strange on him, usually all bluster so much larger than himself.

"You've done fine enough," Chu Wanning said gently.

"There's so much work still..." Exhaustion stole the end of Xue Meng's sentence, his shoulders drooping. "At least say you won't be gone for long."

"I spent years trapped here because of Hua Binan," Chu Wanning said. He danced around the reality of the situation. *I spent years trapped here by Mo Ran.* He and Xue Meng had become practiced at this routine. "I'm not going to give up freedom that easily."

Xue Meng looked taken aback. "That's not what I meant, Shizun. Don't you... don't you want to stay with us?"

The words snuck beneath Chu Wanning's skin, twisting beneath the surface. He didn't want to talk about what he wanted. "You make it sound like I'm running away. There's a lot of work to be done outside the palace, too. I'd like to see what I can do."

"You could come with me when I visit Taxue Palace," Xue Meng suggested, but Chu Wanning shook his head.

"I have to do this," he said, firm enough to quell any remaining argument from Xue Meng. Not that he'd be able to say much more, anyway. Pain flared in his lungs, and he turned his head, coughing into a handkerchief while Xue Meng looked on, dangerously close to commenting on it.

What Chu Wanning didn't tell Xue Meng was he couldn't promise to return quickly because he didn't plan on returning at all.

He folded the handkerchief before lowering his hand, tucking the stain of red on crisp white from sight. Chu Wanning had meant to give his life when he ripped the rot of that cursed flower from Mo Ran's chest. Against his calculations, there was still something of himself leftover when he was done. While he was still able to, he would wring dry whatever few drops of use remained in his broken body.

There weren't many left. If nothing else, Chu Wanning couldn't bear to see them wasted.

It took a few days longer before Chu Wanning finally brought up his plan to leave Wushan Palace and travel to Mo Ran. Unlike what Xue Meng might have suspected, Chu Wanning wasn't intentionally avoiding the conversation. But the undivided attention of the emperor of the cultivation world was a precious commodity Chu Wanning was no longer guaranteed, much less in its past abundance, and he had to wait until the opportunity presented itself.

Mo Ran never seemed at ease alone in his presence. Once upon a time, the bloodlust only receded from Mo Ran's eyes with his head pressed into Chu Wanning's waist, Chu Wanning's fingers threading through his hair. The contrast to now was jarring.

But it wasn't a surprise, then, when there was something like relief in Mo Ran's eyes when Chu Wanning told him he'd be leaving. But Mo

Ran buried it quickly, a sharp furrow of his brows casting a shadow over whatever Chu Wanning had seen of his reaction.

"Why?" Mo Ran asked him after a long moment.

Chu Wanning offered him the simplest truth. "I don't belong here."

"That's not true." Mo Ran's eyes burned, fierce and insistent. "Is that what this is about, then? This is your home. The Red Lotus Pavilion will always be yours."

Chu Wanning held back a wry laugh through tightly pressed lips, shaking his head. What was left here, anyway, that was really Chu Wanning's? What could he lay claim to that hadn't been claimed by Taxian-jun in turn over the years? Not even his bed was his own. "That doesn't matter. I'm no *use* here."

"Shizun, how could you say that? After everything you've done... You saved me. I'll never forget that. I will always owe you my gratitude. Always."

"But what do you need from me anymore, Mo Weiyu?"

Mo Ran said nothing, turning away from him with a defiant sweep of his robes. Then, finally, he muttered, "Shizun isn't useless."

Chu Wanning flicked his sleeves and folded his arm behind his back, straightening his spine. "Did I say that?"

"Shizun..."

"I know the scope of my own abilities, thank you. I'm not some helpless child. I was able to remove the Eight Hatreds Long-Suffering Flower from you without my core. I can be of help, still."

"Of course Shizun can." Mo Ran hung his head. Even with the beads of his crown hanging in front of his eyes, he looked every bit the chastised disciple.

Something about it only fed the burn of irritation lapping at Chu Wanning's chest. "So that's what I'd like to do. But there's nothing for me to do here. I'm restless. I've spent years hidden away in this place—" He couldn't bring himself to meet Mo Ran's eyes, didn't want to know what would be reflected in them. "—but I could be *doing* things. I can still make Holy Night Guardians, talismans. I can still teach others."

Mo Ran's eyebrows raised, processing the information as he worked his jaw. Then his face smoothed over, the shallowest pools of dimples

on his cheeks, small drops of poison dotting the ghost of a smile. "Of course that's what you want to do," he said. "I think it's a good idea, actually."

"Do you?"

"You're right, you must be going crazy cooped up here — if you want to travel, you don't need my permission, but — only let me know, I'll have whatever you need to travel prepared—"

Chu Wanning's heart squeezed. "Good," he said, before Mo Ran could say any more. "I can get what I need." That wasn't even a lie; Mo Ran had given Chu Wanning a generous allowance in the aftermath of Hua Binan's defeat. Chu Wanning rarely needed to touch it, but he'd be able to make use of it now. "I wouldn't want to bother you. You have other things to attend to these days."

The bite of his words startled Mo Ran. He jerked his head up, staring openly at Chu Wanning. "Other things?"

"Mn. Like your wife."

"Song Qitong? I..." Mo Ran searched his face, but Chu Wanning only offered him an icy regard, unblemished by any of the childish emotions he felt. "I thought you'd be happy I'm spending more time with her. That... it's easier, seeing her now..."

"Happy?" The cool surface of Chu Wanning's composure cracked. "Mo Weiyu, am I supposed to be happy you spend your time with another wife instead now?" He lashed out, the rage spilling over and carrying the words from his lips before he could think better of it.

He regretted it immediately.

Mo Ran recoiled from him, intense emotion twisting his effortless charm. It snagged on the sharp edges of a wordless, wounded plea, revealing the wreckage remaining from the lost and confused boy Chu Wanning knew from so many years ago. "Shizun... why would you say that?" He spoke plainly, voice open and raw.

Frustration choked Chu Wanning, stopping up his throat, filling his lungs. Why could he never say the right thing to Mo Ran, even now? He offered Mo Ran his life, but it was the only thing he had to give, apparently. Nothing else seemed wanted. "Oh, did you forget you

married me, too? Are you going to pretend that's one of the memories you've lost?"

"No, I— Shizun, what do you want me to say? How can I apologize for that? I don't... I don't know what to say. Tell me."

Chu Wanning stared at him, lips parted. What could Mo Ran say? Would Chu Wanning want to hear it?

At his silence, Mo Ran continued. "I don't know why I did that. I don't know." The endlessly deep violet of his eyes bore into Chu Wanning with a heavy weight. "I wish I hadn't — there's so many things I wish I could undo. I'm sorry."

Chu Wanning wanted to scream at Mo Ran. He wanted Mo Ran to scream at *him*, wanted to forge himself into steel within the raging heat of Mo Ran's anger, make himself strong with it. But he could do nothing with this, only try to hold together the shattered fragments left of himself Mo Ran chipped away with each word.

It was better he was leaving. If he stayed, he wouldn't last much longer beneath the harsh blows of Mo Ran's indifference, either. And if Chu Wanning were destined to crumble, he'd rather that not be the way it happened.

Chu Wanning departed as soon as he could make the arrangements. It hadn't originally been his intention to leave so soon, and Xue Meng protested loudly and tirelessly in the days preceding, but his conversation with Mo Ran made Chu Wanning unwilling to put off the inevitable any longer than necessary. He'd already made up his mind; what point was there in lingering in the halls of Wushan Palace like a ghost? Chu Wanning still had breath in his lungs. Why wait around until he ran out?

The sun climbed lazily over the horizon as Chu Wanning set out. He wanted a head start to have as much daylight to travel by as possible, but he also wanted to slip away early enough to be unnoticed, and wasn't particularly interested in a grand farewell. Neither Mo Ran nor Xue Meng would let him leave on horseback, so he'd had the carriage prepared he always used while traveling during his days as their shizun. He'd take it at least until his first stop, when he could carry on

by himself without his disciples' worry breathing down his neck. Chu Wanning tried not to think of the time he and Mo Ran used it to travel to Wuchang Town, or that evening they spent at an inn. This time, no one would accompany Chu Wanning on his journey.

There was one person who Chu Wanning hadn't been able to slip away from unnoticed. Liu-gong was waiting for him by the edge of the path that wound its way to the Red Lotus Pavilion, standing with his hands clasped behind his back and a patient smile on his lips, as if there was nothing amiss at all about the early hour.

"I hope you won't stay away for too long, Chu-zongshi," Liu-gong told him. "He still needs you, you know."

Chu Wanning scoffed, but he didn't protest when Liu-gong followed him. At the very least, Liu-gong seemed content to accompany Chu Wanning down the mountain in companionable silence, so he found he didn't mind his presence so much.

Maybe it could be nice, after all, to have someone there to wish him farewell.

As they drew closer to Sisheng Peak's main entrance and the carriage waiting for him came into view, Chu Wanning paused for a moment on the path, turning to cast his gaze back at the peak. In the distance, he could still make out the pink haze of the haitang tree at the foot of the Heaven-Piercing Tower. Silhouetted by the golden rays of early morning light stood a familiar figure beneath the long branches, one hand raised to catch a single petal on the tips of slender fingers.

Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning watched him for a long moment, breath caught in his lungs. From where he stood, he couldn't see Mo Ran's face, and he wanted to call out to him, have Mo Ran turn and look at him one last time. How would Mo Ran look, when he saw Chu Wanning at the gates of Sisheng Peak? Would Chu Wanning be able to see any of his feelings reflected on that handsome face?

Would there be any to see?

Suddenly, Chu Wanning ached to see Mo Ran's smile, just one more time. One more glimpse of those deep dimples, that bright and frivolous smile, those shining eyes lit with warmth.

He gathered his courage. This was his last chance.

At the same moment, the sound of a voice cracked the barely-formed bit of strength Chu Wanning had summoned. "Are you ready to leave, Chu-zongshi?" Liu-gong asked him.

Mo Ran's name dissolved on the tip of his tongue, as insubstantial and weightless as the flower petals caught in the same breeze stirring the hem of Chu Wanning's robes, twisting the fabric around his ankles. Some ways away, the slip of pink balanced on the edges of Mo Ran's fingertips flitted from his grasp. He curled his fingers loosely into a fist, still looking down at his hand, as if unsure himself of what the wind had stolen.

"I'm ready," Chu Wanning replied, turning away. Embarrassment at his own sentiment heated his cheeks. The young boy Chu Wanning longed to catch a glimpse of was gone. He wasn't coming back. "It's time to leave."

The dreams only began once Sisheng Peak dwindled to a faint shadow against the horizon. During the day, Chu Wanning stayed busy as best he could — stopping at villages to make repairs to Holy Night Guardians, consulting with the remaining sect leaders to help preserve knowledge of techniques nearly lost during Taxian-jun's rise to power. The stays at villages were ostensibly detours, but they proved far preferable to his meetings with cultivators, and Chu Wanning found himself spending more time on the road and drifting between ailing villages than he did receiving the hospitality of a cultivation sect.

Though the small villages may not have been able to provide Chu Wanning the same standard of accommodations, the villagers he helped never worried about how to treat the former Elder Yuheng. They didn't awkwardly attempt to circumvent any mention of his shattered core or limited capabilities in a way that only drew attention to it, nor did they then hover over him, as if he couldn't sense them keeping a close watch, worried he might crumble to dust at the slightest provocation.

It was easier not to think of the dull ache in his chest that way.

But at night, it didn't matter where Chu Wanning was, how busy he kept himself, or how far he had roamed. Each time his mind drifted to sleep, the Red Lotus Pavilion found him again.

And along with it came Taxian-jun.

Chu Wanning supposed it was the distance he placed between himself and Sisheng Peak causing his mind to wander back to the place he called home for so long. But it rang false, to think it was physical distance that mattered. The distance was there even after Chu Wanning cured Mo Ran of the flower, during the nights Taxian-jun kept his habitual visits to his concubine because they couldn't afford revealing themselves to Hua Binan. Mo Ran slept on the other side of the bed, and only an arm's length away with his back turned to Chu Wanning — it felt just as impossible for Chu Wanning to reach out and touch Mo Ran then as it would be for him to do so now.

And after, when they could begin extricating themselves from the knotted web of Hua Binan's deceptions and Mo Ran no longer needed to keep up the pretense of suffering from the flower's effects, the distance remained. Chu Wanning slept alone, swallowed whole by the bed he never realized was so large until there was no longer another body there beside him. He hated himself for feeling wrong, not having Mo Ran sleeping next to him. How could he have possibly grown accustomed to Taxian-jun's treatment? This was his former disciple, poisoned by hatred and driven by obsession to chase after the master who failed him, to release onto all the rage grown molten inside him. If Chu Wanning pulled out the root of this obsession when he tore the flower from Mo Ran's heart, wasn't that a good thing?

Wasn't this what he wanted?

"Chu Wanning, you would dare try to leave this Venerable One?" Taxian-jun snarled at him, face deceptively calm and lips quirked in a contemptuous smirk, before he pushed Chu Wanning onto the bed and followed him down, prowling over his body.

It was hard to argue with the tangle of desires that resurfaced each night in his dreams.

Back in his bed at the Red Lotus Pavilion, Chu Wanning was already dressed in nothing more than sheer robes, and Mo Ran made quick

work of smoothing his hands over the bare flesh laid out before him. “Do you think you can escape me?” Mo Ran asked, then dipped his head down over Chu Wanning’s navel, brushed his teeth against the soft skin by his hip. “You’re *mine*.” He bit down, hard enough to draw blood, lapped at the beads of red swelling beneath the surface. “This is mine, too.” He looked down at his work, an unfathomable hunger welling in the depths of his gaze, and ran his thumb across the mark on Chu Wanning’s body, smearing bright red against pale skin.

Chu Wanning bit back a hiss of pain. This was nothing. “I’m not *escaping*,” he protested, but Mo Ran didn’t pay attention to him. “You let me leave.”

“Don’t you know your place by now?” Broad palms shoved Chu Wanning’s legs apart roughly. “Do you need a reminder?”

Chu Wanning stared defiantly up at Mo Ran, even as Mo Ran shoved his fingers inside him, testing how much resistance Chu Wanning’s body offered. Within his dreamscape, that place was already dripping and loose, accepting Mo Ran easily as if he’d recently been worked open. *Or as if you prepared yourself*, another part of his mind whispered, *as if you were waiting for him to take you*. Chu Wanning bristled, breath hitching as Mo Ran’s fingers rubbed against the spot that would wear down his defenses, spine arching off the bed and thighs tensing but otherwise withholding any reaction for Mo Ran to take advantage of.

“Hmph.” Mo Ran grunted, displeased, at this small act of rebellion. “You claim you’re not being disobedient, but you still try to keep your cries from me?” Something much larger replaced Mo Ran’s fingers, the blunt head just barely pressing inside Chu Wanning, his body yielding and rim beginning to stretch around its girth. “Your husband will have to give you a reminder after all, it seems.” He rolled his hips forward, pressing all the way inside.

Chu Wanning’s fingers scrambled for purchase against the sheets, lips parting on a gasp and legs wrapping around Mo Ran’s waist, speared open on Mo Ran’s cock in a single thrust. Mo Ran trapped one of Chu Wanning’s hands in his own, pinning it above his head, then used his other to cup Chu Wanning’s face, thumb hooked inside his mouth.

“There you go,” Mo Ran said, low and soothing, voice rolling on the undercurrent of a growl, “that’s it, be good. Let me hear you.”

Mo Ran’s hair fell down around Chu Wanning in a dark curtain, framing his face so all Chu Wanning could see was the desperate need burning up the inky black of his irises. Chu Wanning tried to close his mouth, keep at bay the pathetic sounds Mo Ran wrung from his throat each time he fucked into him, hard and fast and imprecise but overwhelming and inescapable. Mo Ran just tugged at his lips and forced his jaw open, broke free every desire-soaked whine he couldn’t swallow back down.

“Ah... Is this Venerable One still not good enough for you? I know you like this.” Mo Ran squeezed Chu Wanning’s cock, hard and aching where it lay against his stomach. “Look, Wanning... you’re so wet for me.”

“No,” Chu Wanning gasped, eyes no longer able to focus, mind hazy with the pleasure driven into him. Did Taxian-jun use the aphrodisiac he liked so much? He couldn’t remember. But his body felt like it was on fire, like the only thing keeping him from going insane was the cock forcing him open, hot and heavy. “You... you don’t...”

“Don’t what?” Mo Ran didn’t let up his pace.

Chu Wanning blinked, forcing the tears welling in his eyes to fall, no longer able to hold them back. He couldn’t take it any longer. “You don’t *want* me anymore!”

Mo Ran stilled, confusion and anger rippling over his face, furrowing his brows and darkening his eyes. “Chu Wanning, how could you be so stupid?” He slipped his thumb out from Chu Wanning’s mouth, running it along his lower lip, then chased away the tears wetting his cheeks. “You did this,” he spoke softly.

What did that mean? Chu Wanning wanted to reply, to deny or reassure or — something — but his voice cracked on a sob, breath coming in shallow pants, unable to make enough sense of Mo Ran’s words to know what to say.

But even if he did, it would have been swallowed by Mo Ran as he captured Chu Wanning’s lips with his own, moving inside him again, slowly building into a tormenting rhythm. “Don’t leave me,” Mo Ran

whispered, quiet and broken, into the shell of Chu Wanning's ear. "Wanning, please, don't leave me again."

How could he ask that of Chu Wanning, when Mo Ran was the one who slipped away first? What did Mo Ran expect from him? What more could he do, when he had already saved Mo Ran from the flower?

Hadn't he?

When Chu Wanning woke up, his face was damp and his body was reacting as though he were still in the dream. This wasn't the first time it happened, but it didn't make the shame any easier to swallow. Chu Wanning rolled over on the bed, hand curling around himself, face buried in the pillow as his hips moved against the sheets, chasing the release Mo Ran brought him in his dreams, hating himself for the weakness.

But he still succumbed to it in the end, and the knowledge made any satisfaction he could find with his own hand hollow.

Spring's approach, its arrival thawing the chill clinging stubbornly to the air, should have been welcome. These days, Chu Wanning's lungs ached with each icy breath he drew, wracking him with a sharp and frozen burn. But instead, Chu Wanning finally wrote Xue Meng a letter informing him he'd be joining him at Kunlun's Taxue Palace, diverting his course northward as if he were fleeing the encroaching warmth.

Xue Meng would say Chu Wanning was pushing his body too hard, Chu Wanning knew, as he made his solitary journey into the cold. But so what if he was? By now, anything worth doing pushed his body too hard. The handkerchief Chu Wanning pressed to his lips to cover his cough came back stained red more often than not. He made an attempt, at least, to hide this from Xue Meng. But when Xue Meng greeted him at the entrance of Taxue Palace, he took one look at Chu Wanning as he slipped from his horse, feet unsure on the frozen ground, and his smile faltered.

"Shizun, are you traveling by yourself?"

"Who else would I travel with?" Chu Wanning shot back.

Mei Hanxue stepped forward, placing himself between Shizun and disciple. "Chu-zongshi, let's get you inside. Xue Meng and I will show you to your accommodations at once."

"Have a bath prepared for him," Xue Meng added.

Chu Wanning gritted his teeth. "I just arrived. It's not necessary."

But Mei Hanxue had already turned his head to speak to a servant, who bowed and darted off before Chu Wanning could complain any further.

Despite the hassle of Xue Meng's nagging, Chu Wanning found he liked Taxue Palace. The cold never left him here. It became part of him instead, turning his bones to ice so even when he was bundled inside, the chill seeped from his skin, numbing his fingers.

"You're sick," Xue Meng told him that evening over a mouthful of food.

"I'm fine."

"You're *not*." He slapped his chopsticks down, leaning over the table to get a closer look at Chu Wanning's face. "Shizun... you look terrible."

Chu Wanning gave Xue Meng a look more frigid than the air outside. "Where has your respect gone?"

"I'm *concerned*," Xue Meng protested. "I thought — for so long, no one knew where you were, and Mo Ran wouldn't tell me — I couldn't think it, but... my parents..." There was a grief in Xue Meng's eyes that was foreign to Chu Wanning. "I thought I'd lost you, too." He sagged backward.

Chu Wanning should have felt guilty. He was far too numb, too hollow, to feel anything at all. "I'm here now. Eat your food." He tried to sound gentle instead of curt. He wasn't sure if he succeeded.

Xue Meng was right, though. Chu Wanning *was* sick, and had been for a while, and in the halls of Taxue Palace, it finally caught up with him. His dreams took on the lurid pitch of a fever, lingering even as he drifted between consciousness and slumber.

"Are you spreading your legs for that pretty boy Mei Hanxue now?" Taxian-jun spat, one hand wrapped around Chu Wanning's throat, pinning him to his bed.

"Mo Weiyu, you— you— how can you be so shameless!"

"Me, shameless? Which one of us is running from their husband to go whoring himself around to sects?"

"Whoring?" Chu Wanning almost wanted to laugh, but it'd be too much for his lungs. "You're being absurd."

"And you," Taxian-jun said, simmering with anger and tightening the grip on his throat, "will not just *obey me*."

Mo Ran's hand was doubtless cutting off the flow of air, but Chu Wanning was used to struggling for his breaths, so he barely noticed. *Or maybe*, a very small and very distant part of his mind still lucid noted, *you can't breathe because of your lungs, and you're only imagining it's Mo Ran*.

Is that what you'd prefer?

He jolted awake, body shaken by a series of violent coughs. The room was empty. There was no weight against his throat holding him down, just the heavy pressure of sickness laying across his chest. *I'm alone*, Chu Wanning thought, and tried to hold tight onto the thought, keep it close enough to remember when the haze of fever made him lose his way back to the truth.

He didn't get any better as the day progressed. He tried to join Xue Meng for breakfast, but Xue Meng was so incensed by Chu Wanning's condition he marched him back to his room himself.

"I'll tell Mei Hanxue, we need to have a doctor see you," Xue Meng said.

"There's no need. I just need to rest."

"You have a fever," Xue Meng pointed out.

"It will pass."

"You're coughing up *blood*," Xue Meng crossed his arms over his chest and held Chu Wanning's gaze with his own, firm and unyielding.

Chu Wanning sighed. "That isn't new."

"That doesn't make it *better*! Have you told anyone? Does your *emperor* know?" It was rare for Xue Meng to refer to Mo Ran as such. If he was leaning on the authority of Mo Ran's position to help make his point, it meant he was more annoyed than Chu Wanning realized.

"He's the one who brought me medicine," Chu Wanning said, then immediately regretted the slip. "He wouldn't be surprised."

Xue Meng huffed, exasperated, but let it drop. "You're seeing a doctor today." It wasn't a question.

Chu Wanning didn't have the energy to argue.

Exhaustion sunk him into sleep quickly once Xue Meng left, dropped him back into the waiting clutches of his fever and the rolling fog clouding his mind. He couldn't be sure how long he slept; Chu Wanning thought maybe, the doctor Xue Meng summoned came to visit him somewhere amidst his half-waking dreams, a delicate hold on his wrist and low, considerate murmurs breaking through the gauzy blur of his thoughts. But it was like trying to peer up through the steady current of a stream and at the surface — everything was filtered and distorted, and nothing would stay still long enough for Chu Wanning to bring it into focus.

Eventually, he stopped trying.

Something strong and bitter flooded Chu Wanning's mouth. It jerked him from the depths of sleep and into consciousness, but a heavy fog pressed down on him, resisting its pull. Even though he struggled against its weight, he couldn't claw his way past somewhere near half-awake.

Caught in between dreaming and awareness, Chu Wanning felt suspended outside of time. Where was he? He couldn't remember, but he did recognize the taste of the syrupy-thick liquid poured down his throat. Driven by instinct, he lashed out violently at the bowl pressed to his lips, sending it falling to the floor with a loud, hollow clatter.

"Not sweet," he protested. He pressed his face against the shoulder propping him up, trying to shield his eyes from the light and the threat of more of that vile substance. Mo Ran never gave up that easily.

"Shizun!" a voice that was not Mo Ran's said.

Xue Meng? What was Xue Meng doing at the Red Lotus Pavilion?

"Shizun, what are you — ?" Xue Meng sounded startled, but paused to take a breath, voice softening. "Please. You have to drink the medicine. Your fever won't go down if you don't..."

Chu Wanning bolted upright, weary eyes snapping open as best he could force them, trying to gather some measure of composure. "I can drink my medicine by myself, thank you," he said, the emptied bowl and mess left on the floor an accusatory taunt at his attempts at dignity.

"You've been asleep for three days," Xue Meng told him, rising slowly to pick the bowl from the floor. "I even wrote to Mo Ran."

"Ah." That explained the familiar taste of the medicine. But — wait. Chu Wanning's spine straightened, and he reflexively smoothed the blanket covering his lap. Could that mean... "Is he... is he here?"

Xue Meng glanced up at Chu Wanning, something disturbing the surface of his expression and clouding his eyes, but Chu Wanning couldn't place it. "No. He sent back the recipe for the medicine, though."

"Oh." Chu Wanning's body felt so, so heavy. He didn't feel like trying to hold it up anymore, the effort already tiring, so he let himself fall against the bed again instead. "I'm tired."

"If I bring you more medicine, will you drink it, Shizun?" Xue Meng asked, voice small and quiet.

Chu Wanning's eyes slid closed, feigning sleep. He didn't answer.

The next time Chu Wanning dreamed of Taxian-jun, he didn't open his eyes to find himself back in the Red Lotus Pavilion, or with Mo Ran's body on top of his, large hands pawing beneath his robes with something not unlike desperation. It was unusual enough that Chu Wanning didn't realize he was dreaming until he spotted the emperor standing on the other side of the room, head bent and arms crossed over his chest. His dark eyes shone from the shadows as he watched Chu Wanning with a glum expression.

"You're dying," Taxian-jun said.

He wasn't wrong. Chu Wanning peered back at him cautiously, unsure what Mo Ran expected of him.

Mo Ran *tsk'd* softly, annoyed, hands dropping to his sides as he stalked closer to the bed. "Stop that."

"I'm not *trying* to," Chu Wanning snapped, unable to refrain himself. He wasn't suicidal. There was just only so much more his broken body could withstand.

Mo Ran rolled his eyes at him. "Ah, of course. Just like you say you're not trying to run away, you say you're not trying to die," he mocked. "It doesn't matter. This Venerable One hasn't given you permission to die. You think death is your escape? You would run that far?"

What nonsense; Chu Wanning didn't feel like wasting his time trying to argue with him. Instead, he let out a loud huff of breath — a pathetic and cracked sound, his lungs shaking with the force of it — and flung his body, heavily, against the bed.

"I'm trying to sleep," Chu Wanning announced.

Mo Ran looked down at him. "Tell this one," he said, "if you're not trying to die, why haven't you drunk your medicine?"

"It's bitter."

"Still so stubborn?" Mo Ran chuckled. "Even with Xue Meng. Here," he said, then nudged Chu Wanning to the side, slipping onto the bed behind him and collecting Chu Wanning into his arms. Through the thin layer of his sleeping robes, Chu Wanning could feel Mo Ran's heart beat against his back, a strong, steady rhythm, and the heat of his body warmed him. Mo Ran felt solid.

He felt real.

I'm alone, Chu Wanning repeated silently to himself. *He's not here. You're just dreaming.*

"Drink your medicine, Wanning," Mo Ran instructed.

Chu Wanning shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut. "You're not here." If he said it out loud, maybe it would feel more like the truth.

"Aren't I?" Large hands enveloped Chu Wanning's own. "I'm not the one that left you."

"Stop *saying* that."

"Then take your medicine." With his hands still holding Chu Wanning's, Mo Ran moved Chu Wanning's arms so he was cupping the bowl of pungent liquid that sat forgotten by his bed, then folded his fingers around the smooth surface of it so Chu Wanning could lift it up to his lips.

The scent of it alone sent a thread of nausea winding around Chu Wanning's stomach. He pursed his lips, holding them tightly closed, refusing to drink.

Mo Ran sighed. "Do you remember, Wanning," Mo Ran asked him, voice low and gentle, "that wretched and starving little boy you fed congee, back at Wubei Temple? You saved his life."

Chu Wanning's heart tripped, stumbling as its tempo increased, beginning to race.

"He was too weak to even eat on his own, wasn't he? So you had to feed him." Mo Ran tilted the bowl, the medicine splashing against Chu Wanning's lips, and he waited until, finally, Chu Wanning parted them just enough for the liquid to pour into his mouth. "Just like this."

Chu Wanning sputtered as the bitter taste overpowered his senses, noxious and biting, but he tried to swallow down the medicine as Mo Ran's hands guided him into tipping the bowl back further.

"There you go," Mo Ran said, soothing, "almost done."

Chu Wanning choked on the last few drops, but he kept them down. "Disgusting," he complained, tossing the bowl to the floor and burrowing deeper into the circle of Mo Ran's arms.

It wasn't real. It didn't matter if he indulged, no matter how embarrassing it was.

"Thank you, Wanning," Mo Ran said in a pleased tone, stroking the top of his head and placing a kiss on his temple. "You can sleep now, if you want to. I'll stay with you."

"I'm already sleeping." This was a dream, after all. "And you won't. I'll wake up, and I'll be alone." Chu Wanning's cheeks felt damp. He didn't want to talk about this.

"Then come home," Mo Ran said. "All you have to do is come home."

"Don't be foolish," Chu Wanning chastised, though he wasn't sure if it was for Mo Ran or for himself. "It's never that simple."

Mo Ran didn't say anything in reply, but he tightened his arms around Chu Wanning, holding him close, reminding him of his presence. Chu Wanning focused on it for as long as he could, but as his thoughts began to blur — the fever seeping in at the margins of his awareness, obscuring his mind — even that, too, was eventually swept away.

There was a moment upon waking — just one, incredibly brief, but still long enough to disorient — where Chu Wanning expected to feel Mo

Ran's weight against his back, strong arms keeping him pressed against a firm chest. Instead, he woke to an empty bed, an awful ache spreading through his limbs. At the very least, his fever must have broken, because his mind was finally, blissfully clear.

Chu Wanning had been right, then, when he told Xue Meng the fever would pass with rest. But as he swept his gaze across the room, he spotted an overturned bowl in the same place where he had tossed it in his dreams, emptied of its contents.

Had he taken the medicine in his sleep...?

He didn't get the chance to reflect on it any further. At the same moment, his door slid open, and Chu Wanning was no longer left alone in the company of his thoughts.

"Shizun!" Xue Meng greeted him with a smile, posture easing as he met Chu Wanning's eyes, noticing the clarity restored to his gaze.

"Oh, good," commented yet another figure forcing their way into Chu Wanning's space alongside Xue Meng. "You're awake."

It took a moment for Chu Wanning's brain to catch up with his eyes. Was that... Jiang Xi? "What are you doing here?" Chu Wanning asked.

"I asked for him to come," Xue Meng said, ducking his head in a sheepish gesture. "You weren't getting better, and we didn't know what to do..."

Jiang Xi eyed the empty bowl of medicine on the ground. "Turns out, it helps when you take your medicine," he commented.

"I appreciate the concern," Chu Wanning reassured Xue Meng, narrowing his eyes at Jiang Xi. "But I'm feeling much better now."

Jiang Xi scoffed lightly, then flicked his sleeves as he took a seat next to the bed, holding one hand out to Chu Wanning. "I'm sure you do," he said, "but it won't last for long. Here, give me your wrist."

Chu Wanning stared at him for a moment, reluctantly holding out his hand. "What are you saying?"

Jiang Xi was silent for a moment, fingers placed delicately over Chu Wanning's pulse. "You're dying, Chu-zongshi," he spoke at last.

"Oh," Chu Wanning said.

"The hell did you just say?" Xue Meng cried out. "What's wrong with you, Jiang Xi? That's not funny. How could you joke about something like that? He's not dying."

Chu Wanning glowered at Jiang Xi, while Jiang Xi raised a single eyebrow in his direction. "No," Jiang Xi said, "he very much is."

"Shizun..." Xue Meng's voice faltered. "Say he's lying."

"He's the doctor." Chu Wanning shrugged.

"Did you *know*?" Xue Meng was getting too skilled at picking up on the things Chu Wanning didn't say. It had become a problem, especially since Chu Wanning didn't know when the change occurred. Had it happened during the years of Mo Ran's rise to power as Taxian-jun, as Xue Meng tried to rally the only resistance left amongst the cultivation world? Or afterward, when Xue Meng could finally return to Sisheng Peak, beginning the slow and awkward process of accepting Mo Ran as his brother again?

It probably didn't matter when. It bothered Chu Wanning either way.

"My spiritual core is shattered. I'm not young. My body has suffered a great deal of damage. It's not exactly a surprise."

"You're not that old! And you were fine, back at Sisheng Peak!" When Chu Wanning glanced away, Xue Meng sucked in a sharp breath. "You *were* fine, weren't you?"

"I'm guessing you haven't been for a while," Jiang Xi said, a subtle note of questioning lying beneath his words. "You shouldn't have been able to remove the Eight Hatreds Long-Suffering Flower at such an advanced stage. However you managed it, it couldn't have been easy on you. Especially not without your core."

Chu Wanning looked cautiously at Xue Meng, then sighed. "No," he admitted. "I wasn't expecting to survive it."

"Well, it's catching up to you now." Jiang Xi tilted his head, looking at Xue Meng. "Leave us for a moment, would you?"

"What? No, I'm not going anywhere." Xue Meng stood firm. "Whatever you have to say to Shizun, I can hear it."

Jiang Xi glanced back at Chu Wanning, who nodded. "Is that so? If you're sure, then." He took one last glance at Xue Meng before continuing. "I have a theory, if you don't mind."

"Well?" Chu Wanning wasn't feeling particularly patient.

"When you removed the flower from Taxian-jun, was it in the course of dual cultivation, by any chance?"

Xue Meng choked on air. "Y-y-y-you!"

Ah. "Don't ask stupid questions." Chu Wanning's face heated.

"I'll take that as a yes?"

"You perverted old man!" Xue Meng yelled. "What's the point of asking such a filthy thing?"

Jiang Xi addressed Chu Wanning as he answered. "Because I think it's the only reason you lived, Chu-zongshi."

Xue Meng quieted. Chu Wanning blinked back at Jiang Xi.

"How?" he asked.

"I think part of Taxian-jun's soul became attached to yours. You used your soul force, didn't you, when you uprooted the flower?"

Chu Wanning's mind spun. Maybe his fever hadn't broken after all, because he didn't think Jiang Xi could possibly have just said what Chu Wanning heard. "Mo Ran's soul split?"

"It would explain why you're alive. And why you've gotten sicker since leaving Sisheng Peak." Jiang Xi watched him carefully, eyes narrowed in calculation. "You'd need to repeat the technique to restore his soul. But..."

"But what?"

"You've already gotten exceedingly lucky once. For this to have worked, you both would have had to be extraordinarily compatible. Still... there's no guarantee the part of Mo Ran's soul you carry isn't still tainted by the flower's effects."

Chu Wanning gripped the blanket covering him, fingers twisting in the fabric. "It doesn't matter," he said.

"Think carefully. There are other ways to deal with this."

"You mean destroy the part of Mo Ran's soul within me." Chu Wanning's voice froze over, his posture rigid and body stilled in his anger.

"You would get better," Jiang Xi said. "And there wouldn't be a risk to the emperor's clarity of mind."

"No." It wasn't even a question. "It's part of him. I'm going to restore it." His heart raced. He heard Mo Ran's voice from his dreams, saw the

wild eyes that stared down at him. “*Chu Wanning, are you stupid? You did this.*”

Mo Ran had told him, after all. All this time, all this distance Chu Wanning had run, and Mo Ran had been with him, trying to tell him the truth.

“I’ll stay with you.”

And he did. Mo Ran never left.

Chu Wanning felt dizzy with the implications, his chest tight and a heavy lump sitting in his throat at the terrible hope beginning to swell within him. He had to leave as soon as possible. He should write to Mo Ran first, tell him to expect his arrival, he’d have to convince Xue Meng he’d be fine on the road, but he couldn’t stand to delay—

Xue Meng coughed into the back of his hand. “When you say ‘repeat the technique’ to restore his soul,” he said carefully, “which technique do you mean?”

“The dual cultivation, obviously,” Jiang Xi noted wryly.

Xue Meng looked like he was ready to faint.

Chu Wanning wished he could sink through the floor and disappear completely.

By the time Chu Wanning returned to Sisheng Peak, the hope had surged through him, twisting its way through tendons and filling hollow spaces, replacing the blood in his veins and the air in his lungs. It found every crevice within him to make a home and then, not content to sit still, reached further into his heart.

The hope was unbearable. If it collapsed, he would be crushed completely in the wreckage.

Chu Wanning met with Mo Ran again for the first time with the sun sinking beneath the horizon, waiting at the threshold of his rooms, the golden light silhouetting Mo Ran’s form.

“Shizun,” Mo Ran greeted, a smile dimpling his cheeks but his eyes searching and unsure. “I’m glad you came back.”

“This is my home, isn’t it?” Chu Wanning nodded stiffly at him, turning away and drawing him inside. His face was far too thin for

this. His heart wanted to look back at Mo Ran, never tear his eyes away from him again.

“I got your letter,” Mo Ran said, trailing dutifully after Chu Wanning while he led him, vaguely, in the direction of his bed. Chu Wanning never had to initiate this sort of act before. He wasn’t sure what he was doing. “I also got Jiang Xi’s.”

Chu Wanning stilled, jaw clenching. He didn’t know Jiang Xi had written to Mo Ran, too.

“He told me about the, ah...” Mo Ran trailed off, uncharacteristically shy. “Well. What we’ll need to do.”

Something brittle snapped inside Chu Wanning’s chest. He turned on Mo Ran, an unnameable mixture of emotions bursting from him, wanting his words to lash out and strike where he couldn’t with Tianwen. “You need to fuck me. Right?”

“Yes. That,” Mo Ran agreed weakly, a faint look of shock rounding his eyes. Where was his thick face now?

Chu Wanning wondered for the first time if he’d be able to go through with this. But Mo Ran at least seemed to catch on, pulling on Chu Wanning’s sleeve and bringing them both to the bed.

He stood behind Chu Wanning, hands hovering over Chu Wanning’s clothes, questioning. *Repulsed*, Chu Wanning hissed at himself. *He doesn’t want to touch you. Not without being mad.*

“Ah, Shizun...” Mo Ran began. “Do you want me to...?”

“Don’t call me that!” Chu Wanning snapped. “You act like you’ve never done this before! Are you going to pretend to be some— some— clueless virgin?”

Mo Ran’s breath hitched. “I’m sorry, Shizun,” he said, still using that formal title, that perfectly deferential speech. Each word dripped with guilt, thick and nauseating. “Of course I’m not.”

“Of course,” Chu Wanning echoed. He held himself perfectly still as Mo Ran methodically removed layers of fabric from his body, his touch careful and precise, never lingering too long where it wasn’t necessary.

Even stripped of every scrap of fabric separating his skin from Mo Ran’s, Chu Wanning had never felt so fiercely guarded from Mo Ran’s touch as he did in that moment. It was worse still he longed for it, his

body wanting to lean into Mo Ran's hands just to feel their weight on him. The shame burned.

Mo Ran undressed himself, still an intentional distance placed between himself and Chu Wanning, and then sat on the edge of the bed. Chu Wanning lowered his eyes, hiding from whatever there was to be found in Mo Ran's expression — the possibility there was nothing to find at all — but it only drew his attention to the way Mo Ran wasn't aroused.

The smallest embers of warmth stirring low in Chu Wanning's gut were suddenly snuffed out.

"Is this how you want it?" Chu Wanning asked him, realizing Mo Ran intended he sit in his lap. His fingers curled into fists at his side, nails digging into his skin and pressing crescents into the palms of his hands. "Will you ask me to beg, too?"

Finally, Chu Wanning had managed to spark something besides placid obeisance in Mo Ran's eyes. His brows drew down, frustration marking his tone. "I thought it would be easier like this, for you."

"Why would you think that?"

"Shizun, I... as you pointed out," and there was that bashfulness painting his face, "I do have experience."

"And I don't?" How many times had Mo Ran fucked him like this? Chu Wanning knew what it was like.

So you know you like it. Chu Wanning quickly quieted the traitorous voice.

He worried at his lower lip, distracting himself with the scrape of his teeth, then stepped forward with a determination he didn't really feel, placing his hands on Mo Ran's shoulders and straddling his lap. "Well," he gritted out, "I'll defer to your greater body of experience."

Mo Ran didn't rise to the bait, instead gripping Chu Wanning's hips, a cautious, barely-there force. One hand reached behind him, feeling for his hole, and at last, at last, they had reached familiar territory. Chu Wanning closed his eyes, breathed slow and deep through his nose. When he felt the cool slide of the finger pressing against him, he nearly jumped off of Mo Ran's lap, eyes flying open.

"It's not an aphrodisiac," Mo Ran reassured him, holding Chu Wanning in place. "It's not. It's just — it'll make it..."

"Easier?" Chu Wanning asked, struggling to find his voice. He never asked for anything to be easy, would never expect it from Mo Ran. *I thought I was giving my life to you.* What was a concept like *easy*, compared to that?

But it was better than nothing, Chu Wanning supposed.

He let Mo Ran work him open, hiding his face in Mo Ran's neck, arms wrapped around him. Mo Ran had two fingers in him, stretching him with slow and patient thrusts, when Chu Wanning couldn't stand it anymore. "Enough," he told Mo Ran. "Get on with it."

Mo Ran stilled. Chu Wanning thought he was about to argue with him, but instead Mo Ran slid his fingers free, wrapping them around his cock. Chu Wanning held his breath, listening to the wet sound of Mo Ran's hand working himself to full hardness, compensating for the arousal Chu Wanning could no longer inspire in him on his own.

Despite what Chu Wanning dreamed about, his body actually wasn't used to this sort of treatment anymore. And as excessive as he thought Mo Ran's preparations with his fingers were, it still hadn't quite prepared him for how much he stretched around Mo Ran's cock, a fine-edged pain at the intrusion.

He could do this. He lowered himself slowly, guided by the hand on his hip, biting his lips and focusing on controlling his breaths. Hadn't Mo Ran done worse to him? Wasn't this nothing compared to the torment inflicted on him before? How could he complain, when Mo Ran treated him so considerately, took so much care in how he touched him?

But Chu Wanning's chest ached anyway, tears stubbornly dotting the corners of his eyes. He ignored them, pushing past the dull pain radiating through him, moving his body in concert with the slow roll of Mo Ran's hips. It was so much, it was too much — Mo Ran was everywhere; inside him and surrounding him at once, yet Chu Wanning felt isolated, completely cut off in every way that mattered from the person joined with him.

Something must have been working, though. Amidst the sounds of sweat-slicked skin against skin and their shallow, panted breaths, Chu Wanning felt a stir within him, like there was a force he couldn't see reaching inside to pull something free. If it had any effect, Chu Wanning couldn't tell — not with his head buried in Mo Ran's shoulder, trying not to fall apart each time Mo Ran fucked into him.

"Stop," Chu Wanning said eventually, his rhythm faltering and body slamming down, hard, seating Mo Ran inside even deeper, forcing a gasp from his throat. He didn't cry, he *wouldn't* cry, but he couldn't help the tears that overflowed each time he blinked his eyes. "Stop... Mo Ran, it's too much."

Strong arms wrapped around his waist. "No," Mo Ran growled. "You can take it."

The world spun around Chu Wanning in a violent blur, Mo Ran flipping them both over so Chu Wanning was on his back, laying spread open on the bed. His mind scrambled to reorient itself.

"You want to, don't you?" Mo Ran asked him, leaning over Chu Wanning's body with one hand held flat next to Chu Wanning's head, the other wrapped around his thigh. "You love taking my cock. Tell me, Wanning."

"Why?"

Mo Ran slammed his hips against Chu Wanning, thrusting fiercely inside him, tortuously slow. "Because I want to hear it."

Chu Wanning threw his arm over his eyes. "Please," he managed to say. Mo Ran must have known, could see the shameful reaction of Chu Wanning's body with his own eyes. There was no need for him to speak the words.

"Please what? Ask sweetly, and I'll give it to you."

Chu Wanning's chest rose and fell in quick, shallow bursts. "Please, don't..."

"Don't what? Don't fuck you?"

"Don't *stop*," Chu Wanning whined, legs trembling, fingers twisting in the sheets. "Don't stop, Mo Ran, please, I want... I want you..."

Whatever walls Mo Ran constructed to dam up his hunger burst, flooding his movements with a new ferocity. It crashed into Chu Wan-

ning, drowning him in Mo Ran's desire, and he let himself fall beneath the surface. He didn't particularly feel like coming up for air. For as long as Mo Ran would have him here, Chu Wanning would break open his chest for Mo Ran to feast on him, hollowing him out so Mo Ran could make room for himself.

As long as Chu Wanning could feel him.

"Stay," Mo Ran gasped, a single breath holding a lifetime of need.

What else was there for Chu Wanning to offer in return, other than the plain and undressed truth? With a shaky breath, he reached up to sweep aside the hair clinging to Mo Ran's temple, knuckles brushing against his skin with a tender gentleness. "I will," he said.

He hoped it was enough.

Chu Wanning woke with his body curled in on itself, lost amidst the cold and empty expanse of a far-too large bed. Sometime in the night, he'd wrapped his own arms around himself in a laughable imitation of an embrace, tucked his legs close to his chest to make himself small. He was alone.

He almost thought he was back at the room in Taxue Palace, still lingering on the fringes of a fever and his mind smeared across the boundary of reality and fantasy. A wild fear spiked his heart rate, wide-eyed and instinctual, racing through his veins. Had he only just recovered from his fever now? Had everything else been nothing more than some hazy reverie, born of his own imagination?

But the ghost of Mo Ran's touch marked Chu Wanning's skin, ached between his legs. Blinking his eyes open, relief washed over him, chasing away the bitter panic sitting at the back of his throat. He was home. He was at the Red Lotus Pavilion.

But he was still alone.

Where was Mo Ran? He'd told Chu Wanning to come home, and Chu Wanning did; he'd asked Chu Wanning to stay, and Chu Wanning promised he would. So why wasn't he here? Did they fail, had they not restored the fragmented part of Mo Ran's soul to him?

Or had they succeeded, but with the flower uprooted from Mo Ran's body, his soul no longer reached out for Chu Wanning?

No. A single-minded clarity struck him, dispelling the tangled mess obscuring his head, focusing his thoughts into one voice: *Mo Ran won't leave*. Suddenly, Chu Wanning felt certain he knew where Mo Ran was, like there was a map carved into his bones, always leading Chu Wanning to him, always leading him home.

He threw on an outer robe and boots, not caring how he looked, and raced out into the fragile chill of the early morning air. His feet carried him down the peak, moving with their memory of the way, the path itself a part of him for how often he had followed it. It took him to the place where everything began — to the tree heavy with pink blossoms at the foot of the Heaven-Piercing Tower, where a boy with a bright and frivolous smile once saw Chu Wanning, and thought he looked gentle.

Chu Wanning stopped just a few paces away from where Mo Ran stood beneath the haitang tree, one hand held out as the breeze carried a soft stream of petals down from its branches, waiting to catch one on his fingers.

Inhale.

Mo Ran was so close. All Chu Wanning had to do was reach out one arm and he would be able to touch him; all he had to do was call out his name and have Mo Ran turn to see him.

Exhale.

Mo Ran looked up, past the swirl of flowers tumbling through the air between them, and met Chu Wanning's eyes. "Wanning," he said, his expression endlessly warm. Two deep dimples marked his cheeks, his smile wide and bright, and the golden rays of early morning light cast a fire in his eyes that danced as he gazed back at Chu Wanning. "I'm glad you're home."

The world shifted beneath Chu Wanning's feet; everything clicked, effortlessly, into place around him. He was home.

That was enough.



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